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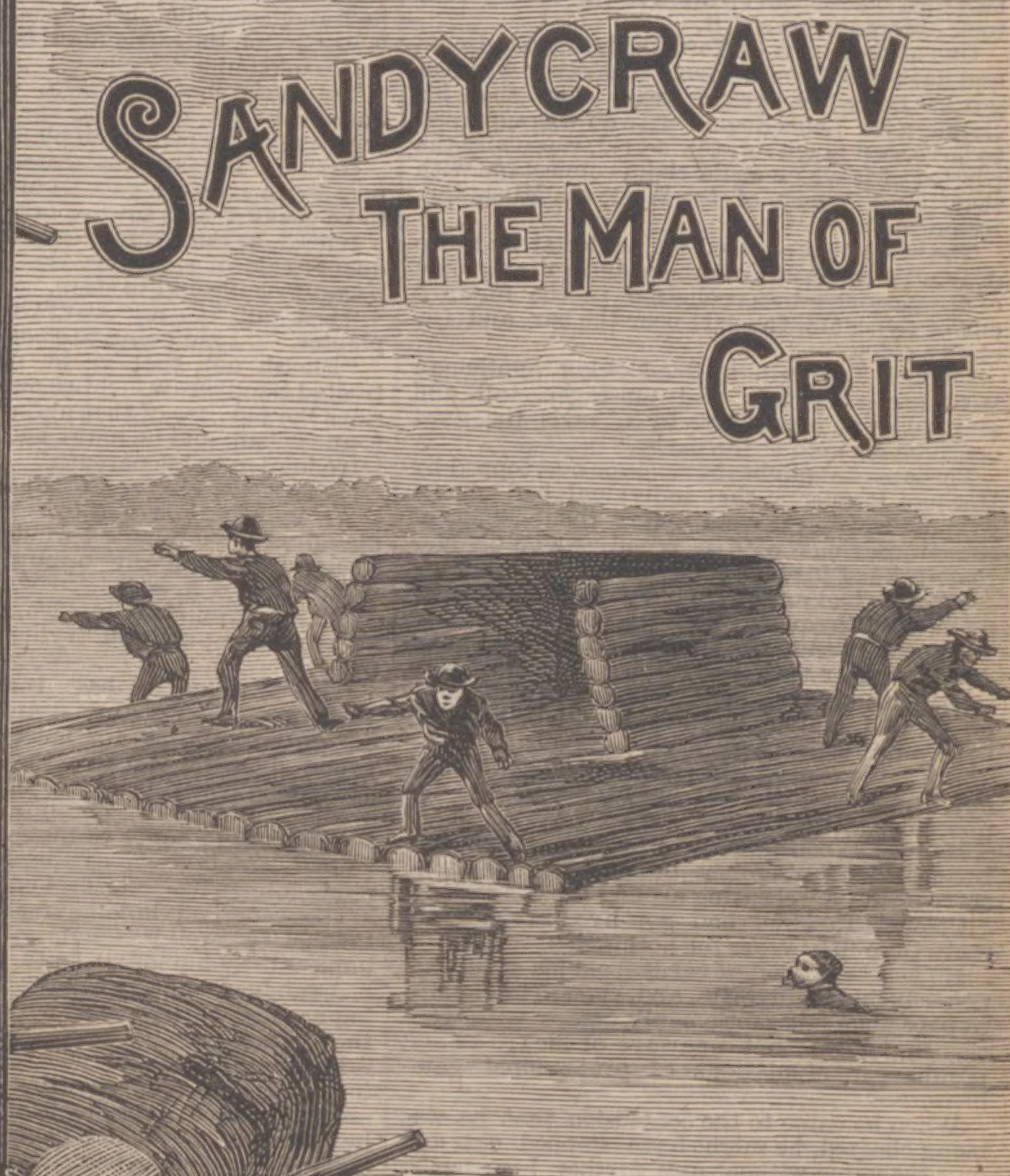
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SANDYCRAW THE MAN OF GRIT

OR,
THE RIVER SPORT'S REVENGE.

BY MAJ. DANIEL BOONE DUMONT,
AUTHOR OF "SALAMANDER SAM," "THE OLD
RIVER SPORT," "COLONEL DOUBLE-
EDGE," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE MAN OF GRIT.

"I BELIEVE there is going to be a fight over there, Gus."

"It does look that way just now."

"Who are the people? I suppose you know them all."

"I know most of them, that's a fact; but I fancy that you know more than I do about the tall, elderly gentleman who is standing up by the table."

"Yes, I am acquainted with him. He is Colonel Tazewell, of Mississippi, one of the old-timers, a heavy planter and a wealthy man."

"He looks the character. Well, Cliff, the man who is facing him is Sandycraw."

"Sandycraw? Is that the man's real name?"

"Partly it is, and partly it isn't. His full

SANDYCRAW RUNG FOR THE ENGINE TO STOP, SEIZED HIS RIFLE, AND HASTENED TO TAKE PART IN THE ACTION.

name is Alexander Crawley. Alexander of course became Sandy, and Crawley was easily shortened to Craw, and, as he is notoriously a man of grit, he was naturally called Sandycraw, and the name has stuck to him."

"What is he?"

"A professional gambler, and two of the men near him there are his particular friends and partners. The young fellow with the long black hair is Andrew Jackson Jones, commonly called Jack, who is a very promising expert at poker for one so young. The tall and big man, immense in every way, is Herman Rassler, a German, I suppose, though there is nothing but his name to show for his nationality, and he is a man who knows everything about all sorts of games."

"I am afraid that they mean mischief, Gus, and if there is going to be a fight I shall side with Colonel Tazewell."

"Of course you will, for his daughter's sake, but I don't believe that there will be any fight."

The big steamboat Emperor was plying as a regular packet between St. Louis and New Orleans, when the stage of the river would permit her to do so, and that a fight should be expected on board of her was not a bit surprising, as she had seen many such in her time.

She was then on her up trip, with a big passenger list of assorted humanity, and there was a good deal of gambling going on, as well as a good deal of drinking, either of which, and especially both together, may be expected to lead to difficulties more or less serious.

The difficulty that had sprung up that evening might or might not prove to be serious, and the two men whose conversation has been reported took different views of it.

One of them was Clifford Darrell, a handsome and dark-eyed Kentuckian. The other was Augustus Bonesteel, several years older than his friend, a St. Louis drummer, who was supposed to have seen much of the world, especially the portion of it which could claim connection with that great artery of the West, the Mississippi River.

The scene that aroused their interest had also drawn the attention of others, and quite a crowd of the passengers was collected in the forward end of the cabin, the part near the bar and the clerk's office.

Colonel Tazewell, a fine-looking gentleman with iron-gray hair and mustache, tall and straight as an arrow, was by all odds the most conspicuous man of the party.

Perhaps he might have been overtopped by Herman Rassler, if that individual had chosen to stand up; but he was seated then, gazing at the proceedings with a broad grin on his face that spoke of inward amusement.

The row had arisen from a cause that was by no means infrequent.

Colonel Tazewell had consented to play a quiet game of poker with Jack Jones, doubtless considering him young and innocent, if not unsophisticated, and having no reason to believe him to be a professional gambler.

The game proved to be the reverse of a quiet one, and Jack Jones was surely the reverse of unsophisticated.

He won so constantly—in fact, so outrageously—that his antagonist began to suspect that there must be "cheating around the board."

Colonel Tazewell had not lived in the world more than fifty years for nothing.

He had been fond of cards from his youth up, poker being his favorite, and, though he claimed to play none but gentlemanly games with gentlemen, he was not unaware of the tricks and peculiar manipulations of professional gamblers.

When he came to the conclusion that he was being cheated, he might have stepped out and quit the game without any further loss; but it suited him to stay in and try to catch his adversary in the act.

This proved to be a difficult thing to do, and in the mean time he continued to lose.

The difficulty lay in the fact that the cheating was not done by the manipulations of Jack Jones, but through the intelligence conveyed to him by his confederates of the state of his adversary's hand.

After a while the work of the main confederate was interfered with by pushing outsiders, and the young man began operations on his own account.

Then he was speedily detected.

Colonel Tazewell, who was watching him like a hawk, caught him in the act of palming a card, and rose to denounce him.

"You young rascal!" shouted the planter.

"You are a swindler and a common cheat."

"What's that?" demanded Jack Jones, as he jumped up and faced his antagonist.

"I sat down here under the belief that I was going to play with a gentleman, but have discovered you to be a swindler and common cheat. I know that you were cheating me all through the game, but have only just now been able to catch you at it."

"You had better take care what you say, old man."

"No words are strong enough to express my opinion of such a scoundrel as you," retorted the planter, "and I mean to make an example

of you. Give up my money, this instant, or I will crush you where you stand."

Colonel Tazewell looked able to make his threat good, as his adversary, though lithe and active, was decidedly a light-weight; but Jack Jones showed no fear, and there was not a quiver on his pale face.

As the planter started to get around the table, he was stopped and confronted by the person whom Gus Bonesteel had described as Sandycraw.

Sandycraw, like his young confederate, was obliged to look up at the tall and soldierly gentleman before him, as he was by no means a heavy-weight, being a man of middle age and small stature, with short, brown hair, a brown mustache that showed some gray hairs, cold and resolute blue eyes, and an expression that spoke of abundant nerve and complete fearlessness.

He was dressed like a gentleman, and his manner was mild and conciliating, and his smile as he spoke to the planter was as childlike and bland as that of a heathen Chinee.

"Let me beg you, colonel, not to be too hasty. Your passion, permit me to say, is beneath your dignity, and beyond the demands of the occasion."

The man spoke so well, with such a good choice of words, and in such mild and persuasive tones, that Colonel Tazewell stopped and stared at him in surprise.

"What business is it of yours?" demanded the planter. "Who are you, anyhow?"

"My name is Alexander Crawley, and some people call me Sandycraw. At present I am a peacemaker, and peacemakers should always be respected. Look at that insignificant object as he stands trembling before you, and tell me if he is worthy of the noble rage that you propose to waste upon him."

The insignificant object, which was Jack Jones, was not trembling at all, and the recent sneer on his lip had given place to a smile.

Herman Rassler was seated near the young man, with a broad grin on his face, and seemed to be shaking with inward laughter.

Indeed, as Sandycraw continued his grandiloquent style of speaking, the entire assemblage began to smile and to stare.

"Get out of my way!" roared the angry planter. "I am going to smash him!"

"Smash not, that ye be not smashed," entreated Sandycraw. "Let me beg you to consider the sad case of that unfortunate youth. He is an orphan, and he never had the honor of an introduction to his parents."

"Clear out, I say, or I will fling you at him!"

"I implore you not to resort to such harsh measures. As a missile I would not be a success. You might spoil my beauty, and many fair women would weep."

"Look here, Mr. Crawfish, or whatever your name may be; are you trying to make sport of me?"

"By no means. I have too much respect for your years, your character and your position. I am only appealing for mercy to a misguided young man. I perceive that the career of a promising poker-player is in danger of being prematurely ended. Let him live, and he may yet become an honor to his country and his unknown parentage, developing from a clumsy neophyte into an accomplished expert."

The scene had become really ridiculous, and Colonel Tazewell was not slow to recognize its unpleasantly humorous features.

A subdued snicker caught his ear, and, looking around, he saw smiles breaking out among the assemblage.

For himself, he did not feel a bit like laughing. He perceived that he had been placed in an undignified attitude, which might become ludicrous if he should continue the passionate style with which he had started.

As for Sandycraw, he "never cracked a smile," and the expression of earnest entreaty which he threw into his features was almost pathetic. There was really no ground to suspect him of a desire to make sport.

"That promising poker-player," said Colonel Tazewell, slightly changing his tone, "has cheated me most shamefully."

"Of course he has," answered Sandycraw, "and that is not the worst of it. He has been found out. Imagine the misery of a man who has been found out. Those of us who have not been found out can afford to pity him. Yes, sir, he cheated you most shamefully. A more clumsy trick I never saw played, and the fellow ought to be kicked all over the boat, and then set ashore ignominiously, because he was unable to distinguish a gentleman like Colonel Tazewell from a country jake."

"This is all nonsense," put in the planter. "What is your talk worth?"

"It is at least worth something in the way of restitution. The money on the table, colonel, is yours. All who are present will admit that."

"He cheated me all through the game, I tell you."

"Possibly, but he was not found out. That is in his favor. It is enough that he was found out at last. Pick up your money, colonel, and let the poor wretch sink into merited obscurity, there to meditate upon the consequences of his clumsiness."

"The wretch deserves to be punished, and I mean to make an example of him."

"Beware!" solemnly exclaimed Sandycraw. "Touch him not! For all you know, you might be striking your own son."

This seemed to be an absurd statement for Sandcraw to make, and doubtless all present were impressed by its absurdity, with the exception of the man who spoke and the man to whom he had spoken.

The effect upon Colonel Tazewell was so surprising as to be almost startling.

He turned suddenly pale and as suddenly red, pressed his hands to his forehead, and staggered for an instant, as if he had been seized by a vertigo.

Clifford Darrell pressed forward to his assistance; but the planter straightened himself up again.

"What do you mean?" he hoarsely demanded.

"What do you know about my son?"

"No more than you do, in all human probability," answered Sandycraw. "I merely caution you to take care how you meddle with miscellaneous young men, as you might, for all you know, come into collision with your own son."

"This is folly," said the colonel, frowning heavily, "and I have had enough of it."

He gathered up the money on the table, thrust it into his pocket, and walked away gloomily.

CHAPTER II.

THE LOST SON.

AFTER the departure of Colonel Tazewell, the groups that had gathered about the two disputants, broke up, some of the men, perhaps, disappointed at the peaceful ending of what had promised to be a lively row.

Sandycraw and his two friends, Jack Jones and Herman Rassler, went out on the guards.

Clifford Darrell and Gus Bonesteel seated themselves near the forward part of the cabin and discussed the strange occurrence which they had just witnessed.

"That was a queer scene," remarked the drummer.

"More than queer," replied Darrell. "The consummate cheek, the astounding impudence of that man Sandycraw, as you call him, went ahead of anything I ever saw or heard of."

"Yes, he is good at that. Some consider it cheek, and some set it down as nerve. He is not called Sandycraw for nothing. That man, Cliff, would face a regiment, and he would fight them if necessary."

"Colonel Tazewell must have known that the man was making game of him, and I am surprised that he did not knock him down."

"The bravest of us, my boy, are afraid of being laughed at, and Sandycraw had the advantage of your colonel in the chance that he might turn the whole thing into ridicule. He fully had the whip-hand of him at the last, too, when he spoke to him about his son. I wonder what that meant? Has Colonel Tazewell lost a son?"

"Yes; I have heard something about it, but not much."

"There must be a story hung to that, and I would like to know what it is. Can't you find out, Cliff? Are you well acquainted with the old gentleman?"

"I believe I may say that we are friends, though it is not long since I formed his acquaintance. My father sent me down into Mississippi with a drove of mules to sell. Colonel Tazewell took several of them, helped me to dispose of the rest, and was very kind to me."

"That handsome daughter of his, was she kind to you, too? Why, Cliff, I believe that you are actually blushing. Well, my boy, I hope that the course of true love may run smooth for once, and in return for my good wishes you ought to get hold of the story of that lost son of Colonel Tazewell's, and tell it to me."

"If I happen to hear anything about it, Gus, I will tell you what I hear; but you know that I don't want to be intrusive."

"Of course you don't. I only say that the scene of a while ago will give you a good chance to throw out a hint."

"If I see a chance, I will take it."

"I wish you would, Cliff. I've got so much curiosity that I think I ought to have been a Yankee, instead of a born and bred Missourian."

Clifford Darrell seemed to be willing to oblige his friend, or perhaps he had some curiosity of his own to gratify.

He walked back to the ladies' cabin, and looked around for a lovely brunette face which he fancied he might find there; but there was no such face visible.

It was getting late, and the ladies had retired to their state-rooms.

On a sofa he saw Colonel Tazewell seated, with his head down and a frown on his face, as if in melancholy meditation.

The planter looked up as the young Kentuckian came near, and beckoned to him.

"I am glad you have come back here, Darrell. I want to consult you about something. Will you sit down here a few moments?"

Darrell gladly complied with this request, and the colonel began to speak, apparently with some difficulty and hesitation at first.

"I must ask you to excuse me, my young friend, if you find me a little off color just now. I have been worried."

"I hope you have not allowed that little disturbance down yonder to excite you," suggested Darrell.

"No, it is not that. I was ashamed of myself for letting that man put me into a false position with his fine talk; but that did not bother me. It was something at the close of the disturbance that set me to thinking and made me worry. Did you hear what he said about my son?"

"Yes, sir, and I noticed that it had a strange effect upon you."

"It gave me a queer feeling, I admit. It was not so much what he said, as his manner of saying it, that struck me. He said that if I touched that young scamp in anger, I might strike my own son. I had never looked at that sort of thing in that light before; but the man with the queer name spoke the truth. If my son is living, he might be, for all I would know, that young man, or almost any other young man I should happen to meet. Did it seem to you, Darrell, that the man had any special meaning in what he said?"

"No, sir. I suppose that he merely spoke at random, probably knowing something about your misfortune."

"Yet his manner seemed to suggest some special meaning, and it is possible that he may know something about my boy."

"When was your son lost?" Darrell ventured to inquire. "How old would he be now?"

"He would be about the age of that young rascal who cheated me. I lost him when he was an infant. He was stolen. It was a very sad case. Perhaps my headstrong nature and passionate temper were the real cause of the trouble. If so, I have suffered for my fault. If you would care to hear the story, Darrell, I will tell it to you."

"It would deeply interest me, colonel." This is the story that Colonel Tazewell told:

"When I was about twenty years younger than I now am, I was what might be called a wild young fellow, though I was married and settled. I was rich and hospitable, fond of pleasure and travel, and had an unfortunate way of picking up new friends and fastening on them.

"On one of my journeys I made the acquaintance of a man a few years older than myself, to whom I took a great liking.

"His name was Dave Wenham, and I knew him to be a professional gambler; but he was one of the most gentlemanly men of his class I ever met. Indeed, it was because of his gentlemanly ways that I fastened on him as a friend.

"I took him home and made much of him, and he stayed with me a few weeks, returning after a short interval and making a longer stay.

"He was quite at home in my house—my own brother could not have been made more welcome—and he was on the best of terms with my wife and my neighbors, to none of whom did I give any hint of his objectionable occupation. He was my friend, and that was enough for them all.

"Being called away on business, I left the house and plantation in charge of my guest, and feeling that my affairs were entirely safe in his hands, I stayed away longer than I had intended to.

"Returning unexpectedly, I found Dave Wenham making love to my wife.

"There was no mistake about it. I saw and heard enough to convince me beyond the possibility of a doubt that the false-hearted scoundrel had taken a mean advantage of my absence.

"As I told you, Darrell, I was headstrong and passionate, and there was a volcano of wrath in my breast at that moment, but I tried to control it.

"I spoke to him as mildly and reasonably as I was able to, and he answered me with insolence and defiance.

"Then the volcano burst forth and overwhelmed him.

"I knocked him down and tied him; then I dragged him out of the house and made the negroes flog him unmercifully."

"That was terrible," Darrell could not help saying.

"It was a cruel and cowardly deed, and I have repented it ever since—the more so, perhaps, because it was the beginning of my misfortunes.

"My false friend dragged himself away, sore and bleeding, but vowing vengeance as he went.

"Within six months my wife died after giving birth to Ella, and she had scarcely been laid in her grave when Louis, my baby boy, was stolen.

"He had been taken out for an airing by his black nurse, and they were not far from the house when a man rushed up to them, snatched the child from his nurse's arms, and ran away with him.

"The woman was so badly frightened that she did not notice the scoundrel's face, and could be sure of nothing except that he was a white man; but I concluded from such points as she could give me that it was Dave Wenham, who had stolen my child. Perhaps it was be-

cause I was more ready to believe that than anything else.

"I was convinced that it was he who had done the deed, and it was a fearful vengeance that he had accomplished.

"Believing this, I set out in search of him, and after a long hunt, I found him.

"I besought him, meekly enough, to give me back my boy, and offered to settle a small fortune on him if he would restore the child; but he answered me with such scornful insolence as drove me frantic again.

"I knocked him down, and would probably have killed him if I had not been pulled off.

"The next day he challenged me.

"You might suppose, Darrell, that I could refuse to accept a challenge from a professional gambler; but Dave Wenham had associated with gentlemen, and was as good a gentleman as those among whom he went, and I hated him so.

"We met, and the fight was a fair one, and I shot him through the heart.

"Then it occurred to me that I had destroyed my only chance, or perhaps my best chance, of finding my boy, and I grieved over the death of that man, and it has been a continual sorrow to me ever since, during all the years that have seen me search for my lost son without finding him."

"Have you had no trace of him?" asked Darrell.

"None at all. I advertised extensively, spent money freely, and used every means I could think of, but all without avail. There were plenty of false clews, plenty of frauds, plenty of attempts at imposition, but nothing that could lead me to my boy or put me on his track. Is it possible, now, that the man with the queer name knows something about him?"

"It is possible, colonel, but not at all probable. It is likely that he had heard something of the story that you have told me, and that he sprung his talk on you at a venture."

"But his manner hinted, and I thought, that he knew more than he said. I wish I could get hold of him in some way, and find out whether he really does know anything of that business."

"Suppose you let me try to help you," suggested Darrell. "Suppose I get acquainted with the man and try to worm his secret out of him, if he has one."

"Will you do that for me, my young friend? If you will, you shall find that I am not ungrateful. But you must be careful, as I fancy that he is a dangerous man. You must be careful, too, to keep him from suspecting what you are after."

"I will be careful in every way. If it seems to be necessary, I will follow him up. Now, colonel, it is time that we were both in our beds."

CHAPTER III.

AN ENEMY FROM ARKANSAS.

AFTER the fracas at the card table, Sandycraw and Jack Jones went out on the upper guards of the boat, and Herman Rassler followed them, looking as big as any two ordinary men when he stood erect.

"I don't want you to get into such a scrape again, Jack," said Crawley, laying his hand on the young man's shoulder and frowning at him.

"It didn't look to me like a serious matter," answered Jack.

"I kept it from being a serious matter; but that is not the point. You ought to have sense enough to judge the sort of man you are playing with, so that you may know how to treat him. Anybody could see with half an eye that Colonel Tazewell was a gentleman and accustomed to big money games. I will venture to say that there is very little he don't know about poker. Yet you tried on him a common trick, that could scarcely deceive a country jake, and you played it so clumsily that he hopped on it at once. It was all so useless, too. You had got enough, and I was giving you all the points you needed; but you had to strike out for yourself and make a botch of it."

"I suppose I was a little too previous," admitted Jack.

"A good deal too previous, and it might have been a serious affair if I had not chipped in, as the old gentleman was going for you red-eyed."

"I wasn't afraid of him."

"Why should he be afraid?" put in Herman. "I was there and watching things. There was nothing for the boy to be afraid of."

"But we are not hunting fights," persisted Sandycraw. "It is our business to keep out of fights, and to do nothing that will draw us into them. Besides, I was anxious that Jack should avoid an encounter with that man."

"Why with that man, more than with any other man?" demanded Jack.

"Did you hear what I said to him at the last? I told him that if he should hit you he might, for all he knew, be striking his own son. I now tell you, Jack, that if you should get into a fight with that man, or any stranger of his age, you might be fighting your own father."

"So I can fight nobody but women and boys, I suppose. Who was my father, anyhow?"

"As I have frequently told you, in the words of our friend Dundreary, that is one of the things that no fellow can find out; but we may happen to come across him if we keep on traveling and looking about. I am glad that the difficulty was stopped so easily. All's well that ends well. But I thought it proper to give you a warning, Jack, about your style of play."

"That is all right," said Rassler. "The boy must be more careful hereafter. What pleased me, Sandycraw, was the way you talked that fire-eating colonel out of his fighting humor. It was the most amusing thing I have seen in a great while. I was afraid at one time that you were carrying the joke too far, and that he would drop on the taffy you were giving him; but he didn't drop. Now, my friends, we will go inside, and remember, Jack, no fighting. Do you ever catch Sandycraw and me in fights?"

"I think I have heard of your doing something of the kind," observed the young man.

"Only when we couldn't help ourselves. We never fight unless we are forced to it."

Yet there was a fight awaiting at least one of the three at that moment, and there was no avoiding it, and only a step was needed to confront him with extreme peril.

The saloon portion of the cabin was nearly unoccupied at that hour; the card-tables were deserted; the lights were burning low; the bar and the clerk's office were open, but their attendants were drowsing; two passengers were lounging on chairs, unwilling to retire to their close state-rooms; and this was all the life that was visible in the cabin, with one exception.

The exception was an elderly man, tall and gaunt, who had lately come on board at an Arkansas landing.

Though he was evidently attired in his best apparel, he had the unmistakable appearance of a countryman, probably a farmer or village storekeeper.

He had a set and savage look, like that of some ravenous wild animal, and the broad hat that was slouched down over his forehead did not conceal the fierceness of his eyes.

This man was pacing up and down the forward part of the cabin, within a limited space, evidently on the watch for something for somebody.

He found what he was looking for when Sandycraw walked in from the guards, followed by Herman Rassler and Jack Jones.

The Arkansan instantly stepped up to the gambler, and confronted him with an expression of intense hatred.

"So I've found you at last!" he exclaimed.

It needed only a glance to convince Crawley that he had a difficult subject to deal with in the tall Arkansan; but he could not decide at first whether he was facing a lunatic or an enemy.

He was as cool as usual, however, and there was no sign of uneasiness in his voice or manner.

"Yes, you have found me," he answered, "and you might have found me sooner if I had known that you had lost me."

"I hain't come here to take any of your lip. You are the man they call Sandycraw."

"I admit that I have been honored with that title."

"My name is Scatchell, Sam Scatchell, and I'm from Arkansas."

"Glad to meet you, Mr. Scatchell. If there is anything I can do for you, please tell me, and be quick about it, as I want to go to bed."

"You'll get as long a rest as you want afore I'm done with you. I've been huntin' you ever since you killed my boy."

Whether the man should prove to be a lunatic or an enemy, this was clearly a serious matter, and Crawley's face hardened; but there could be no doubt that he was mystified.

"When did that happen?" he mildly inquired.

"Twas about three months ago that you gave him his death-blow. You didn't kill him then, but that was what brought him to his grave."

Crawley's mystification increased.

"There must be some mistake about that matter, Mr. Scatchell," he observed. "I am sure that I have given no man his death-blow within the past three months, and I am not in the habit of killing boys."

"You are the man they call Sandycraw, and you are a gambler by trade," solemnly and savagely replied the Arkansan. "My son, George Scatchell, was a good and honest young man until he met you. He was a very bright and smart young man, too, if I say it myself."

"I don't remember meeting any such person," interjected Crawley.

"But he had cause to remember you. He was a clerk in a store at Little Rock, and he had never before been a hundred miles from home, when he was sent to St. Louis with three thousand dollars to buy some goods. On this very steamboat, the Emperor, he met you, and you persuaded him to play cards with you, and to keep on playing, until you had beat him out of every dollar of the money that had been trusted to him."

The sum of three thousand dollars was no small amount to win from one man, and a gleam of intelligence shone in Crawley's eyes, as if he had some recollection of the event; but he said nothing.

"After the loss," continued the Arkansan, "my boy got off at the next landing, and came direct to me. He told me all about his trouble, and gave me the name of the man who had beat him out of his money, and declared that he could never hold up his head again, as he was disgraced and ruined for life."

"He took it rather hard," suggested Crawley.

"'Twas a death-blow to him. I said that I would put a mortgage on my place, or sell everything I had, to get the money and straighten him out, and he thanked me with tears in his eyes for what he called my goodness to him. The next morning I found him dead in the barn, where he had shot himself through the head."

"It was very considerate of him to go to the barn," coldly remarked Crawley. "Well, Mr. Scatchell, I am afraid that your son was neither as good nor as smart as you supposed him to be, and it is a pity that young men will gamble, especially with money that does not belong to them; but I can't see that I am responsible for the calamity."

The sneering tone and look of the gambler, more than the words he spoke, irritated the Arkansan, and forced him into frenzy of rage.

"You are responsible for it!" he screamed. "You drove him to his death, and I swore on his body that I would go gunnin' for you and hunt you down until I killed you."

There could no longer be a shadow of doubt that this was a serious matter, and Herman Rassler and Jack Jones prepared to back up their friend and partner.

"Is your gun ready?" quietly asked Crawley.

Nothing can be plainer than the fact that in such an encounter as was impending a man who is cool and collected has a great advantage, supposing both to be equally armed, over a man who is excited and angry, and Crawley evidently had all the coolness and collectedness.

Yet his life was never in greater danger than at that moment, and never did he have a closer escape from death.

The quickness with which Sam Scatchell reached for his pistol was something astonishing.

He had it out in a flash, and would have "got the drop" on his wary antagonist, had it not been for the forcible intervention of an unexpected party.

CHAPTER IV.

A VERY SHARP GAME.

THE party who intervened so unexpectedly to prevent the impending collision was no less a personage than Captain Tom Sayre, the autocrat of the Emperor.

He was a stalwart and powerful man, who meant that his word should be law on the boat, and who considered himself fully able to enforce his authority at all times and under all circumstances.

Captain Sayre pushed himself in between the disputants, regardless of the personal peril involved in the act, and it was by the merest chance that neither of them happened to fire at that instant.

He pushed the Arkansan away, backed up against Sandycraw, and commanded the peace in vigorous style.

"Put up those pistols, both of you!" he ordered. "Do you suppose that I am going to let you fight aboard of this boat, and kill yourselves, and muss up my cabin? Not much. You haven't paid for any such privilege as that, and it can't be allowed. What's the matter with you, anyhow?"

"That scoundrel murdered my son," shrieked Sam Scatchell as he shook his finger vindictively at the gambler.

"Nothing of the kind," answered Crawley. "He told me just now that his son shot himself because he had lost money to me at cards on this boat some three months ago. That is all I know about it."

"He murdered my boy, and I mean to kill him."

"The man seems to be a lunatic, and of course I have a right to defend myself."

"I have nothing to do with your quarrels," said Captain Sayre. "You must settle them yourselves; but you can't settle them by fighting on this boat. If you are bent on blood, I will tell you what you can do. The Emperor will land at a wood-yard in the morning, and you two can quietly step ashore and fight it out. Will that suit you?"

"I will kill him!" exclaimed the Arkansan.

"I will give the man a fair fight," assented Crawley.

"That is the way to talk," said the captain; "but you must promise me that you will keep away from each other until the boat lands and you go ashore. Unless you give that promise, I must take charge of you and have you guarded."

The belligerents gave their promise and retired to their state-rooms, and thereafter all was quiet on board of the Emperor.

Long before the boat made her landing at the

wood-yard the affair of the night and the expected affair of the morning were known to everybody.

The barkeeper had heard and seen the difficulty between Sandycraw and Sam Scatchell, and so had the young man in charge of the clerk's office, and so had the passengers who were lounging in the cabin, and of course they were bound to spread the news of such an exciting event.

Captain Sayre, too, was willing that the affair should be known, as he did not object to a fight, provided that it was a fair fight, and that it was not to take place on board of his boat.

It would be an advertisement for the Emperor, and would tend to give both the boat and its captain an enviable reputation.

As Sam Scatchell appeared to be unacquainted with everybody on the boat, and consequently was without friends to assist him, Captain Sayre, who was determined that the stranger should have fair play, bestirred himself to find a second for him.

He would gladly have taken that duty upon himself; but his position compelled him to be content with supervising the arrangements.

Of course there could be no difficulty in finding a suitable man for such an affair among the Emperor's passengers, and Captain Sayre settled at once on Colonel Tazewell as the man he wanted, and applied to him successfully.

As it was a long time since the planter had assisted in an "affair of honor," and as he was in the habit of lamenting the loss of the "good old dueling days," he was more than willing to act as the friend of Sam Scatchell, and to make sure that he should have all the chances which the "code" allowed him.

It was understood that Crawley would be seconded by Herman Rassler, who had been a soldier, and was in all respects a fit person for that important duty.

Though Sandycraw appeared to be in no manner discomposed by thoughts of the approaching combat, speaking of it openly as if it were an affair that could result in no unpleasant consequences for himself, he had some natural doubts concerning its termination, and confided to Rassler what might possibly be his last wishes.

"I am afraid that there is no chance for the gentleman from Arkansas," said he, "as I shall be obliged in self-defense to do my best; but there's never any telling what luck may do, and it is well to think of what might happen."

"Oh, you will be sure to come out all right," observed his friend.

"I suppose so; but, at the same time, it might happen the other way, and so I have a few words to say to you. If I should be the one to go under, keep Jack going as I have started him, and don't let him get out from under your eye. At the lawyer's in St. Louis—Heffernan, you know—you will find some instructions that I left there to be given to you in case of accident. And, Herman, look after Mollie, and see that she don't suffer."

"All right, Sandy; but there is no danger that I will have to attend to those matters."

Sam Scatchell was equally confident, and he expressed his confidence freely to Colonel Tazewell when that gentleman spoke to him concerning the outcome of the duel.

"I'm sure to kill that scoundrel," said he. "It's nearly three months that I've been huntin' him, and I never go gunnin' for a bear or a man without fetchin' in the game."

"Are you a good pistol-shot?" inquired the colonel.

"First class. Never knew a man who could beat me, not even my son Harry. But that ain't all—not by a long shot. That villain is a murderer, and he deserves to die, and the Lord has sent me out to slay him, and I am goin' to kill him, as sure as I stand here now."

Colonel Tazewell was privately of the opinion that the wild-eyed Arkansan was inclined to be a fanatic, as well as too confident; but he deemed it best not to oppose the ideas of his principal.

"It is just possible," he suggested, "that the affair may not turn out as you believe it will, and in that event, you see, I ought to know what you would like to have done."

"That's all right, Colonel Tazewell. You are a gentleman and a true friend, and I shall be obliged to you for your kindness as long as I live. I am sure of what is going to happen; but I will make all things straight, just the same."

The Arkansan gave Colonel Tazewell a wallet containing considerable money, and a direction.

"That's where I live," said he. "If this thing should turn out as you seem to think it may, though I don't believe there's a chance of that, just box me up and ship me home. My wife died before poor George's trouble came on us, and sometimes I thank God for that; so there's nobody to grieve for the old man now but my son Harry."

In the gray light of the early morning the Emperor ran her nose into the bank at the wood-yard, which was on the Kentucky side of the river, just above the Tennessee line.

The sun was not yet up, but most of the passengers were, and they were anxiously or eager-

ly awaiting the issue of the affair which had been made known among them.

A few of them protested against it as an unchristian and inhuman piece of business; but by far the greater number, whatever their private feelings may have been, seemed to regard it as something in the nature of a picnic or a circus.

The wood-yard was sufficiently isolated to guarantee freedom from any outside interference with even more extensive fighting arrangements.

There was no habitation anywhere near it—nothing but a long pile of corded wood at the bank, kept there for the use of steamboats.

Sometimes a man was there to watch it and sell it, and when there was not, the boats took what they wanted, kept account of it, and paid at their pleasure.

On this occasion there was nobody to look after the wood, and the Emperor's crew and passengers were free to do as they chose.

As soon as the line was made fast, and the gang-plank was run out, the deck-hands hurried ashore for the wood, but their operations were seriously interfered with for a little while by the procession of passengers that filed up the bank for quite another purpose.

All who were awake and about did not go ashore, as a feeling of delicacy or of dread kept a considerable number back; but those who remained on board clustered on the upper guard, and kept their eyes strained in the direction of the expected tragedy.

As if by the common consent of all concerned, the principals and their seconds went ashore in advance of the others, followed closely by a physician—of course there was at least one among so many passengers—and the more or less interested spectators came straggling along after them.

A suitable locality for the duel was easily found in a piece of partly-cleared ground a little back of the woodpile, out of sight of all but the smokestacks of the Emperor.

No time was lost in making the requisite arrangements, as the deck-hands would soon have the wood aboard, and the moments were considered precious.

The distance that had been agreed upon was stepped off, and the men were placed in position with their seconds near them, and the non-combatants at a respectful distance and out of the range of probable, or at least possible bullets.

The conditions of the combat were simple and easy to understand.

The order was to be one, two, fire! and at the third word the duelists were to open fire and continue at their pleasure until one of them fell, or their charges were exhausted, standing where they were placed, or advancing, as they chose.

Herman Rassler tossed up a coin to decide which of the seconds should give the word, and he won, as he had perhaps intended that he should.

The two revolvers were examined by both seconds, and each handed to his principal that which was intended for him.

As Rassler gave his principal the pistol, he whispered three words, and a nod of intelligence was his answer.

Colonel Tazewell at the same time addressed a few words of caution to Sam Scatchell, advising him to keep cool and watch sharply for the word.

"Don't worry about me," answered the Arkansan. "I'm all right. I came here to kill that scoundrel, and I'm goin' to do it."

Again it occurred to Colonel Tazewell that his man was too confident, and that there might be a slip 'twixt the cup of revenge and the expectant lip.

Herman Rassler took his position midway between the combatants, but of course a little to one side of the line of fire, and the spectators awaited, almost breathlessly, the issue of the tragical affair.

"Are you ready, gentlemen?"

Evidently they were ready.

"One—two—fire!"

There was no need of a second shot—no chance to advance and fire at will, as the conditions permitted.

Sam Scatchell was a corpse, shot through the head, and Crawley was untouched.

The two pistols were discharged at exactly the same instant, as near as the spectators could judge, and yet there had been a slight variance—so very slight that only the most accurate and watchful ear could have noticed it.

In giving the word Herman Rassler had made the pause before the word "fire" the merest trifle longer than that before the word "two"; but that slight difference was enough to serve a murderous purpose.

What fraction of a second the gain may have been does not matter; it was sufficient to give Crawley the first fire and destroy the aim of his adversary.

Thus Sam Scatchell was slain by premeditation and in accordance with a previous arrangement; but the game was so played that only Crawley and his second were aware of it.

The physician hastened to examine the fallen man, and had no hesitation in pronouncing him dead.

"Was it a fair fight, gentlemen?" demanded

Rassler, appealing to Colonel Tazewell and the spectators.

Nobody could say that it was not, and that was the end of the affair.

The body of the Arkansan was carried down to the boat, and was wrapped in a tarpaulin, until it could be duly coffined and shipped to the direction which he had given Colonel Tazewell.

Then the Emperor, having taken in her wood, steamed up the river as if nothing had happened.

CHAPTER V. "EAVESDROPPING."

CLIFFORD DARRELL had been in no hurry to go to bed after his conversation with Colonel Tazewell in the ladies' cabin of the Emperor, and he would not have got there any sooner if he had been in a hurry.

His friend Gus Bonesteel was waiting for him, and was anxious to hear the story which he had no doubt the old gentleman had been telling to Clifford.

So they adjourned to their joint state-room, where they lighted cigars, and Darrell told the story to his friend exactly as he had heard it from Colonel Tazewell.

The drummer listened attentively, and at the close of the narrative he mused a while in silence.

Then came out with an opinion which was much like one of Jack Bunsby's.

"It seems to me, Cliff, that the old gentleman has taken a strong hold of the notion that Sandycraw meant something when he spoke to him about his son; but it is more likely that your idea of the matter was the right one, and that the man of nerve and cheek, knowing something of Tazewell's story, gave him that talk as a bit of a bluff. Yet, my boy, I would not say that Colonel Tazewell may not be right. Gamblers—that is, what you may call the upper class of gamblers—stick together closer than thieves, and it is quite possible that the revenge of one of them may be handed down as a legacy to another. Yes, there is a chance that the old gentleman may have struck the true vein."

"It was agreed between us," observed Darrell, "that I was to make the acquaintance of that man Sandycraw, and try to worm his secret out of him, if he has one."

"Yes, I understand that. You are to do it for the sake of the dark-eyed damsel who is sleeping back there, and who is dreaming of you as I hope."

"I hope so, too; but we needn't go into that now. As for this Mr. Alexander Crawley—"

"Yes, Cliff, he is the point of present interest, and I am afraid that in that direction the course of true love may not run smooth. You may make up to Sandycraw; but it is likely that he will repel your advances, or will let your efforts fall from him like the rain slides off a duck's back. If he drops on your game, as he probably will, you might as well try to draw blood from a turnip as extract any information from him. He is a dangerous man, too, as Colonel Tazewell says, and you can't be too careful in dealing with him."

"A man can only try, and only do his best," observed Darrell, "and I think I can be depended on for that."

The two friends kept on talking until their cigars were out, and thus they missed the scene in the forward cabin between Crawley and Sam Scatchell.

They heard of it early enough in the morning, however, and it was quite a matter of course that they should be present at the duel.

Clifford Darrell, like Colonel Tazewell, was inclined to hope that Sandycraw might come out of the encounter uninjured, though he wished no harm to the Arkansan; but the sudden and tragical end of Sam Scatchell was more of a shock to him than he cared to own.

Gus Bonesteel was also a little unnerved, and he shook his head sadly as he walked away from the scene with his friend.

"It is certain that Sandycraw is a dangerous man," said he. "The death of that poor devil from Arkansas was a case of cold-blooded murder."

"Murder?" exclaimed Darrell. "What do you mean? Was it not a fair fight?"

"That is all I have to say. I am not going to let my tongue drag me into trouble, and I have said too much already."

Sandycraw was not what might be called a lion in consequence of the fatal result of the duel, and yet he was the observed of all observers.

It is hardly too much to say that he was regarded somewhat as a wild beast might be that is permitted to roam at large, being stared at and at the same time avoided.

For his part, he conducted himself very quietly and modestly, making himself as inconspicuous as possible.

He not only refrained from boasting of his prowess, but, when he was compelled to speak of the affair, he regretted the part that he had been compelled to take, and the death of the man from Arkansas.

"If I could have got out of the fight," said he, "or if I could merely have wounded the man,

nobody would have been better pleased than I; but he was determined to kill me, and I had to defend myself. It was my life or his."

Sandycraw made no more efforts to get up games of cards, but refused to be drawn into any, seldom visited the bar, and kept himself as secluded as a man could on a steamboat full of passengers without shutting himself up in his state-room.

This conduct was considered highly commendable by Colonel Tazewell and others.

It was owing to the gambler's seclusion that Clifford Darrell happened to overhear a conversation that was highly interesting to him, as well as somewhat strange and unexpected.

His state-room adjoined Crawley's, and he was lying in his berth a few hours after the duel, and Crawley had gone in his room with Jack Jones, and the young fellow began the talk which Darrell could hardly have helped hearing if he had wished to.

Indeed, after he had caught the first few words, he was quite willing to hear more, as he believed that with such a man as Sandycraw any game that could be played was a fair game.

"I am tired of this thing, and I am done with it," was what Jack Jones said.

"What are you tired of?" inquired Crawley.

"This card-playing business."

"And is that what you are done with?"

"Yes. Since I have seen and know what it leads to, I don't want to have anything more to do with it."

"What does it lead to, Jack? In your case it has led to an easy life, good clothes, and plenty of money. What more can you ask for?"

"I can ask to be satisfied with myself, and that I never can be while I play cards for money. As for what it leads to, I know that in one instance it has led to two deaths. Was the money that you won from that old man's son worth his boy's life and his own life?"

"I wish you would drop that, Jack," replied Crawley. "You are too squeamish. In fact, you talk like a fool. I was not responsible for the death of the old man, or for the death of his son."

"The cards were responsible, then. They ruined the young man, and he killed himself; the old man followed it up, and you killed him. The cards did it all."

"That is very silly talk, Jack. The same kind of thing happens in what is called legitimate business. Not only the men who deal in stocks and cotton and grain, but men who buy and sell all kinds of goods, are most of them gamblers. Every now and then one of them fails, and goes crazy or kills himself, and that is only because he had bet on the wrong side. In those affairs, too, there are just as many cold decks and other kinds of cheating as in card-playing. Please don't give me any such nonsense."

"All that may be as you say, sir. You know more about such matters than I do, and I am not going to dispute your word. But I know what gambling with cards leads to, and I am going to quit it."

"You talk like a fool, young man. You have the devil in your blood, and I am glad that you are no son of mine."

"Whose son am I, then?" demanded Jack. "Where did I come from, and who was my father?"

"You came from nowhere in particular, and you never had a father, to my knowledge. I suppose that some man must have been responsible for your existence; but it seems that he never cared to own you. I picked you out of the gutter, have brought you up in good style, have taught you all you could take in, and have trained you so that you have good chances to make money in the sporting line, and now you want to go back on me."

"I didn't want to go back on you, Mr. Crawley; but I do want to go back on the cards."

"What else would you do? How would you propose to get a living?"

"There are plenty of openings for a young man who is willing to work."

"Plenty of openings for a fool to starve. But there's no use in arguing the point, as I don't intend to let you quit. A sporting man you are, and a sporting man you have got to be. I mean to keep you under my eye, and you will have to work the racket for all its worth."

"I am afraid, Mr. Crawley, that we will have to differ on that point."

"It is not always safe to differ with me, young man."

This ended the conversation, and Jack Jones left the state-room and went out on the guard, where he was shortly afterward waylaid by Clifford Darrell.

To the Kentuckian the talk that he had overheard was quite unsatisfactory.

Sandycraw had denied that he knew anything of the parentage of Jack Jones, and that of course upset the idea which had formed in Colonel Tazewell's mind, if the gambler had spoken the truth; but he might have lied.

Letting this pass—that is, giving it up as a conundrum which he could not guess—it occurred to Darrell that he felt a strong sympathy for Jack Jones, and that he might reasonably

encourage that young man in the laudable course which he had laid out for himself, of breaking away from the gambling business.

Therefore it was that he waylaid the young man and spoke to him kindly, congratulating Jack upon his determination to quit the gambling business, and offering to assist him if he wished to keep out of it and get into some business that would satisfy him.

Jack Jones was evidently pleased with this offer and the manner in which it was made, and yet he was naturally a little suspicious.

He thanked his new friend, but answered that he did not yet know what course he might take, and would be obliged to consider the matter.

Darrell began to wonder whether his move had been a judicious one, and a little later he became convinced that he had acted without sufficient consideration.

There was more than one person on the boat, it appeared, who had ears to hear and eyes to see, and Sandycraw was not a man to neglect his opportunities.

Just a few minutes after Darrell and Jack Jones had separated, the former young gentleman was met and accosted by Mr. Alexander Crawley.

"I am glad to meet you, Mr. Darrell," said the gambler, who of course had a speaking acquaintance with the young Kentuckian. "In fact, I have been looking for you, as I wanted to give you a bit of advice, being an older man than you are, and one who may be supposed to have seen more of the world."

"I am always willing to learn, and I never object to friendly advice," answered Darrell.

"What I want is to caution you about overhearing or listening to the private conversation of other people—some call it eavesdropping."

"Sir?"

"Oh, there is no offense intended. We will let it pass, if you please, though that sort of thing, if followed up, might lead to unpleasant consequences. I must confess that I have been eavesdropping, too, and that I happened to overhear a part of your talk with my young friend, Jack Jones. Now, Mr. Darrell, I must respectfully but firmly request you to have nothing to do with that young fellow in the way you spoke of, and to offer him no assistance or even advice."

"I believe that I am my own master," angrily replied Darrell.

"So are we all our own masters, except when we interfere with the rights or perhaps the wishes of others, and in that matter, my friend, I am bound to say to you that you would be interfering pretty seriously with me."

"Is this intended as a threat?"

"It is not a threat; but I will admit that I mean it as a warning."

"It sounds like a threat, and as such I shall disregard it."

"Perhaps you had better not. Your name is Clifford Darrell, I believe, and your intimates call you Cliff. I have been known to climb up on a cliff."

"And a cliff has been known to fall on a climber and crush him."

"If that is the way you take it, Mr. Darrell, I will know what to look for, and will govern myself accordingly."

When Darrell related these events to Gus Bonesteel, he did not get from his friend much credit for judgment or discretion.

"It is clear that you will never get into the confidence of Sandycraw by that sort of thing," observed the drummer. "However, it is just possible that he may serve you better as an enemy than as a friend. But you must be careful of yourself, my boy."

CHAPTER VI.

A WOMAN HEARS THE NEWS.

In a small but handsome house in the southern portion of the city of St. Louis a woman dwelt alone, except for the servants who took care of the house and ministered to her comfort.

She was still a young woman, but passed for a widow, though there was a reasonable suspicion that she was only a grass widow, if any kind of a widow.

By her neighbors and the tradesmen with whom she dealt she was known as Mrs. Crebbs, and that was the name which she appeared to prefer; but some of her intimate friends, who were more or less closely connected with sporting circles, usually addressed her as Mrs. Crawley, and to this she made no objection, though there was no evidence of a marriage between her and Alexander Crawley.

A very handsome and stylish looking woman she seemed to be, with dark hair and eyes, and with a peach-bloom complexion that was not put on for the occasion, and she smiled brightly as she rose and greeted a man who had just been admitted to the house.

The visitor was a man of perhaps thirty-five, tall and of good figure, not at all unattractive as to his face, but with the "tough" look which is seen on so many of those who call themselves sporting men.

He was flashily dressed, too—not in the loud

and coarse style which is common to many of his class, but in the inelegant gorgeousness that proclaimed a sport, and his language and manner were redolent of the air of betting circles and money games.

His name was Dan Thedford, and the style in which he addressed Mrs. Crebbs, or Crawley, proved him to be an intimate acquaintance of hers.

"Well, Mollie, how goes it, and how have you been getting on for the past day or two?"

"For the past two weeks you had better say," she answered sharply, "as it is as long as that since you shed the light of your countenance upon me. What has kept you away, Dan?"

"I have been out of town. Had a soft thing up the Missouri, and stuck to it as long as there was a dollar in it. I brought back a nice little pile, too."

"And since then, I suppose, you have been blowing it in at a faro game in the usual way."

"Not yet, anyhow. As soon as I got in I struck a bee-line for this bird's nest, and here I am, with money to lend you if you want it."

"Much obliged to you, Dan; but I am not in need of any money."

"Your very best friend, then—your husband by brevet—must have kept you well supplied with cash."

"You mean Sandy? Yes, he left me enough to last for a while."

"Where is he now?"

"Down the river somewhere, raking in the ducats and fleecing the jays."

"Have you heard from him lately?"

"Not I. He is a poor hand at letter-writing; but he makes it up in talk when he comes home."

"I have heard from him, Mollie."

"You have? What has he been writing to you about?"

"He has not written to me."

"How did you hear from him, then?"

"Do you never read the papers, Mollie?"

"Hardly ever. I don't care about politics."

"Or about the news, either? Women don't seem to, unless they get it by word of mouth. Well, there's some news in this morning's papers that might interest you."

"About him, Dan?"

"Yes, about Sandycraw. There is a dispatch from Hickman, telling about a scrape he got into down that way."

"What sort of a scrape?"

"A shooting and killing scrape."

"But Sandy was not killed?"

"No, he killed the other man. It was an old man from Arkansas, a sort of wild man, as I judge from the accounts. It seems that the old man had had a son, a clerk in a store, who had been going up the river with some money that belonged to his employers, and had fallen into Sandy's clutches. Sandy roped him into a game, and skinned him out of his last dollar. So the young fool goes straight home, tells his story to his father, sneaks out into the barn and kills himself."

"That was very sad," remarked Mrs. Crebbs.

"I suppose so, though it is not what you might call an unusual thing. But the saddest part of the business came after that. The boy's father, being nigh crazy, I reckon, started out to hunt the man who, as he said, had killed his son, and he found Sandycraw on board of the Emperor, going up the river. He tackled him in the cabin, and they would have fought right there, but the captain of the boat jumped in and said they must go ashore if they wanted to fight. So they went ashore the next morning at a wood-yard, and fought a duel, and Sandy shot the old man through the head at the first fire."

"That was very sad, indeed; but I suppose there was no help for it, as Sandy had to fight to save his own life. He was not hurt, then?"

"Sandy hurt? Not he. But the old man, whose name was Sam Scatchell—"

"What's that?" screamed the woman.

"What's what?"

"The name! What name was that you spoke just now?"

"The name of that man from Arkansas. Sam Scatchell is what the paper calls him."

The conduct of Mollie Crebbs at this juncture was astonishing to Dan Thedford, though he had witnessed many strange scenes in his time.

She sprung from her seat, waved her arms wildly about, and then, throwing herself upon a sofa, burst into a passion of tears.

Her visitor, unable to conjecture the cause of this unreasonable outbreak, sat and stared at her in amazement until the tempest had partially subsided, when he ventured to inquire concerning it.

"What's the matter, Mollie? I never knew you to take on so before. What has started this cyclone?"

She dashed off her tears, rather than wiped them away, and, as she looked up, her face seemed to have suddenly grown harder and older.

"You were right to call it a cyclone," she fiercely answered. "It is only a rainstorm now; but it will tear something to pieces before the world is much older."

"What do you mean? In the name of all that's wonderful, what has got hold of you?"

"The devil has got hold of me Dan Thedford, and he is pulling wide open the doors of the past and future. Sam Scatchell was my father. It must have been my brother George who killed himself, and now my father has been killed, and Sandy Crawley has murdered them both."

Dan Thedford got up from his chair and paced the room excitedly, suppressing a strong inclination to whistle, as the scene was too tragical for that style of expressing astonishment.

"That is the last thing I would have thought of," said he. "It is the roughest deal I ever struck. Deuced hard on you, Mollie."

"On me? No harder than I deserve. But it is hard on *them*."

"The dead ones, you mean? Well, they don't have to stand trouble any more, and the live over do. Somehow, I can't seem to catch onto the thing. How did it work around this way?"

"I am punished for my sins—that's what's the matter, Dan—and God only knows how much more punishment I will have to stand. But I deserve it all—all I have got, and all I may get. I ran away from home, Dan, ran off with a drummer who happened along that way, and he left me when he got tired of me, and went to California, I believe. That served me right, of course, though I hate him for his meanness, all the same. Since I left home I have never sent a word back there, and have never heard a word about any of my folks until this day, and now I have heard that my brother and my father are dead."

"And Sandy Crawley killed them," observed Thedford.

"Yes, he killed them both."

"What are you going to do about it?"

"Do about it? Of course I am not going to do anything about it. What could I do?"

"You might do something if you wanted to. That depends on how you feel about it."

"Never mind how I feel, Dan Thedford. That is none of your business. I will go my own way and hoe my own row, and I don't need the help or advice of any man. I only wish that you would give me the paper which tells that story."

Thedford handed her a newspaper which he had bought for the purpose of proving the truth of his statement.

"There is one other favor that I want to ask, Dan. Don't breathe a word to Sandy or anybody else of what you have heard from me today, and don't let him know that you told me that story."

"No danger of that, Mollie. I don't know what you mean; but you may depend on me for keeping a still tongue in my head."

"You may go then, Dan. I want to be alone and think things over."

CHAPTER VII.

IMPORTANT INTERVIEWS.

DAN THEDFORD kept his promise only partially.

He was glad that Mollie Crebbs dismissed him from her presence, because he was nearly bursting with a feeling of exultation which he feared he might show her if he should remain in her house any longer.

He had a most particular and intimate friend, Barney Carroll by name, to whom he was longing to impart a piece of special intelligence, and he hastened in search of Barney, finding him in a saloon on Fourth street.

In a few moments the two friends were seated at a table in a quiet corner of the establishment.

"I've got some big news for you, Barney," began Thedford. "I struck the best thing out to-day, and just by accident, too."

"Any money in it?" inquired Carroll.

"Well, no, I can't say that there may be money in it; but there is something better than money."

"What is that?"

"Revenge."

"Don't give me anything so soft, Dan. Revenge is like enough to cost money; but I never knew it to pay expenses."

"It benefits the feelings, my boy, and what do we amount to, anyhow, outside of our feelings?"

"That's a great moral question, Dan, and we won't go into it. Tell me what scheme you have got hold of that promises to benefit your feelings."

"You know Sandy Crawley," observed Thedford.

"I do, indeed, and I wish I had never met him."

"I hate that man, Barney."

"Of course you do, and I have no cause to be fond of him, either."

"He played me the meanest, dirtiest scurviest trick that was ever ried on me. He was successful with it, too, and put me in the nastiest kind of a hole. Of course I hate him, as you say, and I am always looking for openings that will help me to get even with him. I have found 'ne at last, Barney, and now I see my way clear to get him into the deepest kind of trouble without any risk or bother on my part."

"A very good scheme if it works. It sounds

well, I'm sure. What is your little game, Dan?"

"You know Mollie Crawley, or Crebbs, or whatever she chooses to call herself?"

"I have seen her, and I know more or less about her."

"And you know about Sandy's scrape down the river?"

"It was in this morning's papers, and the boys have been talking about it all over town."

"Well, Barney, as soon as I struck that story I went down to Mollie's house and gave it to her. Of course she hadn't heard it, as women never read the papers, and I was the first to drop in and tell her. Now, Barney, would you ever think of connecting that story with the biggest kind of a row between her and Sandy?"

"Why, no."

"But there's the closest kind of a connection, and this is the way it comes in. There was a duel, you know, and Sandy killed his man."

"Yes."

"But there had been more trouble before that, as you read in the papers. That man's son had killed himself because Sandycraw beat him out of his money."

"I know that."

"Well, Barney, the solemn fact is that the young man was Mollie Crawley's brother, and the old man was her father."

This was indeed an eye-opener for Barney Carroll, and he did not scruple to express his astonishment freely.

"This is one of the most wonderful things I ever heard of," he said when he had exhausted his superlatives. "It is too wonderful to be true. Are you sure that it is a fact, Dan?"

"Dead sure."

"How did you find it out?"

"Just by telling her the story and giving her the names, and the way she bu'sted out and took on was a caution to wildcats. I almost felt sorry for Sandy when I saw the look of her face."

"It was enough to drive her wild. What is she going to do about it, Dan?"

"I asked her, and she said that she didn't know, and that it was none of my business; but I am as sure as I am that I sit here that she will make it hot for him somehow. She is a deep one, Barney, and she will think the matter over and make up her mind how she can strike him the surest and hardest. I mean to keep track of her, and, if she wants any help in the job, she may work Dan Thedford for all he is worth."

"You had better be careful, Dan. Sandycraw is a bad man to meddle with."

"I am a bad man, too. You mustn't say a word about this, Barney. I shall tell it to nobody else, and it is to be a dead secret between us."

The next day the Emperor terminated her trip by tying up at the St. Louis levee, and Sandycraw, after turning Jack Jones over to the care of some of his friends of the sporting fraternity, went almost directly to the house in the lower part of the city which had been visited on the previous day by Dan Thedford.

He was received there as if he had a right to be on the premises, and was greeted by Mrs. Crebbs, or Crawley, like a lord and master.

No woman could have been more respectfully affectionate than she was at that time and place, and yet there was something unusual in her manner which the sharp eyes and quick ears of the gambler did not fail to notice.

Nothing was there that others would have observed, but something that was evident to him alone—perhaps a little coldness or strangeness—something that he felt but could not describe.

Was she not well? he asked.

Yes, she was well, and had been since he went away.

Had anything happened to trouble her? Had she not enjoyed herself in his absence?

There had been no troubles worth speaking of; but she could not claim to have enjoyed herself, as she had not been to any place of amusement, and had scarcely seen the outside of the house.

Unable to account for that slight and indefinite change, Sandycraw made no further effort to ascertain its cause, but opened a subject that promised to be more interesting—his pockets.

He gave her a considerable sum in gold and paper money, and told her that she was to spend it as she pleased, as there was plenty more where that came from.

Then he proceeded to relate his adventures, or so much of them as he chose to make known to her, and of course recited the Sam Scatchell episode, coloring his account to suit himself.

It must surely have been a great trial to her to hear this story from the lips of the principal actor; but she had already heard it from another man, and had read and re-read the newspaper account, and had of course schooled herself to bear this very interview.

Therefore she listened quite calmly, without betraying more emotion than any other woman might be expected to exhibit under the circumstances.

"I suppose you already know about that business, Mollie," said he, "as I understand that it has been printed in the papers."

"You know that I never read the papers. It is a sad story, and I dislike to hear of such things. I wish you would never speak of it again."

If Dan Thedford had been there, he would have been astonished as he compared her calmness and seeming indifference with the storm that had burst forth when she first heard the story, and he might have credited her with being a consummate actress.

She did not overact her part, and Crawley suspected nothing of her real feelings, though while he was speaking there was continually passing through her mind some such thought as this:

"This money of his I will use in a way that he don't guess at and won't like. It will help me to get justice and punish him for his crimes."

Crawley did not mention the Scatchell affair again, and when night came on he left the house, not altogether satisfied with his visit.

CHAPTER VIII.

SANDYCRAW'S LUCK.

MR. ALEXANDER CRAWLEY had not given Mrs. Crebbs all the money in his possession—not by a considerable amount.

He was by no means a stingy man, but was liberal and even lavish, both in his vices and in his benefactions.

Believing, perhaps, in the old saying, that charity covers a multitude of sins, and interpreting it to suit himself, or perhaps because that which is easily got is freely spent, seldom did a case of charity, deserving or undeserving, come under his notice without pulling something out of his pocket.

He was liberal to Mrs. Crebbs, especially when he was flush, but at the same time he did not forget to look out for himself.

On this occasion he had reserved a considerable sum which he intended to "blow in" at a faro game, resembling in that respect the majority of the men of his class, who win money at games of their own, in order to enjoy the pleasure of losing it at games of other people.

Of course there is always a chance that they may win—though they know well that the chances are against them—and they particularly delight in inventing schemes and combinations for the torment of the tiger in his jungle.

Sandy Crawley had no combination nor any kind of a scheme to beat the game, but he merely wanted to try his luck, knowing that if he should make a big strike it would not be for the first time.

So he sought the lair of a large and handsome tiger on Fourth street, where a heavy game was running every night with the permission of the police, if not under their protection.

The rooms were by no means filled, but there was present a rather interesting collection of humanity, ranging from solid business men down to professional gamblers—if there could be any distinction of caste among men who had gathered there for a common purpose, and who appeared to associate with each other upon terms of almost absolute equality.

There were two faro tables, and one of them was unoccupied, the attention of those present being mainly concentrated upon the other table, where play was eagerly made, though it could not be called heavy.

Crawley seated himself at the unoccupied table, and the dealer there, who was well acquainted with him, greeted him cordially.

"I want you to open a game for me, Jack," he said. "How much have you got to back you to-night?"

"Five thousand dollars."

"All right, I mean to go for it."

The dealer smiled, as he knew that such a statement usually betokened a harvest for him, and he joyfully prepared to gather it.

Sandycraw took none but the biggest chips, and started in to play as if he was in a hurry to eat up the establishment.

His play seemed to be wild and without system, and any experienced and cool-headed gambler would have been willing to "copper" his bets.

He piled his chips on various cards, and when one lost, he doubled his stake; when it won, he changed off.

There was surely no reason for this, though there was an apparent method in it, and perhaps it was as good a method as any that could have been used, as Crawley was a lively winner from the start.

Such heavy betting could not continue long without attracting general attention, and soon the other table was nearly deserted, players and spectators crowding about Crawley and watching his game.

It was a singularly prosperous game, so much so that even the dealer was compelled to show some motion as he noted the rapid transfer of value from his possession to that of his adversary.

Some of the spectators would have been glad

to back the single player's luck and take advantage of it while it was running; but it was understood that the game was Sandy Crawley against the bank, and he was not interfered with.

The interest increased as his play proceeded, as it was the unanimous opinion of those present that there must soon come a break in his luck, which would sweep away all his winnings.

This was the crisis for which they waited; but it did not come.

For nearly three hours the game went on, during which time the interest was so intense that not a drink was called for, and even the cigars were suffered to go out.

At last the dealer threw up his hands, both literally and figuratively, and declared that the bank was broke—that is to say, the sum to which it had been limited as its backing for the night was exhausted.

Then the tension was over, and champagne and other drinks were in abundant demand, and fresh cigars were freely lighted, while all but the dealer and his recent adversary discussed the game.

It was not the breaking of the bank that had aroused the excitement, as the amount won was not very heavy; but it was the singularity of the game and the continuance of the run of luck.

Sandycraw turned to one of the solid citizens, who eagerly congratulated him on his luck.

"Mr. Easterly," he said, without noticing the congratulations, "have you sold that boat which we were bargaining about a while ago?"

"Not yet. You can have her if you want her."

"At the price I offered?"

"Yes."

"All right. Have a bill of sale made out, and I will pay you the price to-morrow."

Mr. Alexander Crawley seemed to have got all he wanted out of that place, and he turned to leave it, after shaking off his friends and acquaintances.

Near the door stood a man who had been watching him closely and maliciously.

As he started out, this man spoke to him or at him, and Crawley recognized Dan Thedford.

"It's a big thing to own a steamboat," sneered Dan.

Crawley took no notice of him, and he spoke louder, so that he could be heard by all in the room.

"So Sandycraw, not satisfied with being a murderer, is going to turn pirate."

Sandycraw turned upon the speaker fiercely.

It was clear that this was intended as a deliberate and unprovoked insult, and all the devil in him sprung to the surface at once.

"What do you mean by that, you dirty dog?" he savagely demanded.

"Dirty dog, yourself," replied Dan. "Do you deny that you are a murderer, or that you expect to turn pirate?"

"You mean, sneaking, cowardly scoundrel! Speak another word, and I will choke the lies out of your throat."

"That is cheeky enough, coming from the blackest of all liars," retorted Dan.

There was a glitter in Thedford's eye which told his adversary that he meant mischief, and it was not to be supposed that he would provoke an encounter in that way unless he was "heeled" and ready to seize every possible advantage.

Therefore Crawley felt that it would be necessary for him to be on his guard, and to resort to other weapons than those with which nature had provided him.

He reached for the revolver which he always carried; but Dan Thedford anticipated his action, by jerking out a revolver and firing with such suspicious suddenness as showed that he had only been waiting for the chance.

Though he fired with scarcely any attempt at an aim, he was so close to his antagonist that the bullet would surely have investigated Crawley's anatomy if the revolver had not been knocked up by a young man who had just stepped in, and that young man was no other than Jack Jones.

The next instant Sandycraw had his assailant by the throat, had thrown him, and was choking him savagely and at the same time beating his head against the floor.

That treatment would soon have made an end of Dan Thedford, if the man on top had not been seized by the bystanders and dragged away from him.

Crawley struggled at first in the hands of the men who held him, foaming with rage, and spitting out vindictive speech at his prostrate enemy.

"Who put you up to that job, you scoundrel? Who set you onto me, you low-lived hound. You are too much of a coward and sneak to play such a game of your own notion. Tell me who put you up to it, and I will forgive you."

But Thedford, who was just then insensible, had no answer to give, and Crawley soon calmed down and went away.

No police were called in, and no public mention was made of the affair, as the proprietor of the establishment knew how to keep such matters quiet.

CHAPTER IX.

A CREOLE FORTUNE-TELLER.

COLONEL TAZEWELL had come to St. Louis with a purpose in view that was connected with his search for his lost son.

Clifford Darrell had accompanied him to the same city with a purpose in view that was connected with the only person of the colonel's family, who was then known to exist—namely, Miss Ella Tazewell.

The young Kentuckian had sent word to his father, informing him of his intentions in this respect, which he had no doubt would be not only authorized but commended.

Darrell had fallen in love with the young lady at her Mississippi home, and on the voyage to St. Louis he had many opportunities for presenting himself to her in a favorable light, and for gently urging his suit.

He had not neglected his opportunities, and he had reason to believe that his attentions to Ella were approved by her father, or had not been noticed by him, though it was not likely that Colonel Tazewell failed to observe anything that occurred before his eyes.

Naturally he had welcomed the chance of being allowed to assist the colonel in his search, as it gave him an excuse for going on to St. Louis, and continuing to enjoy the society of Ella; yet he could think of nothing that he would be able to do in that matter, especially since he had incurred the enmity, or at least the suspicion, of Sandy Crawley.

Colonel Tazewell, however, had a definite plan to follow, knowing what he hoped to accomplish, and how he expected to go to work to accomplish it.

He was merely following up a clew which he had lately got hold of.

A friend of his who was in the cotton commission business, and who knew the story of the colonel's loss and his search, brought him news of a woman in St. Louis who seemed to possess the secret of Louis Tazewell's existence and identity, and who might be persuaded to part with it.

This woman, his friend had said, professed to be a fortune-teller, and he had happened to meet her by accident, and by a still greater accident he happened to hear from her something about Colonel Tazewell's son.

At least, it was his belief that the few words that had casually dropped from her lips, and which he had not been able to induce her to enlarge upon, referred to the lost Louis Tazewell.

What he heard was vague and uncertain; but it was a clew, and that was what had brought Colonel Tazewell to St. Louis.

The planter did not disclose the nature of his errand to his daughter, nor did he take Clifford Darrell into his confidence, though he was then upon almost intimate terms with that young man.

If he had confessed the truth, he would have been compelled to own that he was ashamed of the style of quest which he had undertaken, not so much because of its vagueness, as because of the fortune-telling woman.

It was to be supposed that she and her surroundings were disreputable, and it was also quite probable that she was a fraud, who would only seek to prey upon him, and extract money for useless information.

However, he had come there—although he had ostensibly other business in St. Louis—for the express purpose of seeing the woman, and he intended to visit her, relying upon his common sense and his knowledge of the world to protect him against imposition.

So he left his hotel, shortly after he had got Ella comfortably established there, and began his quest.

The address that had been given him was in the heart of the city, and he found the woman in a tumble-down rookery a little way east of Fourth street.

She had a sign there—not a costly or pretentious sign, but a bit of tin tacked on the crumbling woodwork—the apparent antiqueness of which bespoke her as one of the ancient and permanent institutions of the city.

In characters which age had rendered almost illegible were inscribed her name and profession as she chose to put it—"Madame Lavalette, Seeress."

The fortune-teller had been mentioned to Colonel Tazewell as a mulatto; but he was inclined to believe from the name—though of course it was assumed—that he would find in her a Louisiana Creole, a race with which he was well acquainted.

He was sure of this when he saw her. Though her withered skin was as dark as a mulatto's, and there was a visible kink in her grizzled hair, her features showed the unmistakable type of the descendants of the early French settlers in Louisiana.

She had two rooms, it appeared, as she emerged from one to receive her visitor in the other, and the room in which she received him was furnished not only nicely, but with taste that surprised Colonel Tazewell.

Madame Lavalette was neatly dressed, without any attempt to strike a grotesque costume for use in her profession, and there was nothing re-

markable about her except her lean and withered face and her piercing black eyes.

"So you have come at last," she said, as she seated herself opposite her visitor, and fixed those black eyes upon him.

"Were you expecting me?" he inquired.

"I am expecting many people—you among others."

"Do you know who I am?"

"I know as much about you, I suppose, as you know about me—perhaps a little more. Do you want your fortune told? One dollar, please."

Colonel Tazewell handed her the dollar.

"So you do want your fortune told. Well, I shall say that by this time your fortune, whatever it is, has been made or lost, and that there is not much more to fear or to hope for. But there may be more than is shown on the surface, and I will look into it."

She shuffled a pack of cards which was neither old nor greasy, and proceeded to deal them after the manner of her kind.

It was the usual rigmarole—no less and no more.

The woman easily guessed Colonel Tazewell to be a wealthy widower, and proceeded to tell him of ladies who would be more than willing to marry him, as of course there was more than one such in the neighborhood of his home.

She gave him more equally valuable information of the same character, to which the planter listened or tried to listen; but he could not feign the least interest in the woman's idle guesswork and parrot-like chatter.

"You don't seem to care about it," she said at last. "Are you not satisfied?"

"No. I have had my dollar's worth, but am not satisfied."

"You want me to look further and go deeper, I suppose. I must read your hand, then. Five dollars for that."

Madame Lavalette got the five dollars as easily as the one dollar, as Colonel Tazewell had intended to propitiate her with money.

She took his hand, and closely examined the seams and creases of the palm, her bright old eyes needing no spectacles.

"There is something to tell," she said—"much to tell. The cards may be misleading, but these lines speak the truth and the whole truth. Yours has not been what some would call an eventful life, and yet there have been strange and startling events in it."

"What events?" asked the planter, eager to test her knowledge.

"I see here a great loss. It came many years ago, and was a sad and heartbreaking loss. That was bad enough, but worse followed. There is blood on your hand, the blood of a brother man, shed for revenge. Revenge may be sweet, as some say; but oh! what a bitter taste it leaves!"

Colonel Tazewell looked at the woman in amazement. He had supposed that she knew something about him; but the style of her speech surprised him.

"Yes, I had a great loss," he said. "As you are so wise, perhaps you can tell me what the loss was."

"What loss can be greater than that of an only child?"

"You are right. It was my son that I lost—my only son. Where is he now?"

"Where is he now?" repeated the seeress, giving her visitor a keen and inquiring look. "Ah! that is quite another matter. I know much, but do not pretend to know everything."

"I believe that you can tell me what has become of him," persisted Colonel Tazewell.

"You do? Well, you have faith, and that is a strong point in your favor. Perhaps I can tell you something about him, but it may not be much. If I can tell you anything, I shall have to look into the crystal, and I will do that if you wish me to."

"I do wish it."

"Five dollars more, please."

Colonel Tazewell cheerfully paid the money, and the seeress took from a box, where it reposed on cushions of black velvet, a globe of what appeared to be crystal.

It might have been glass; but she declared it to be the purest crystal, and a stone of great price.

She held this stone between her hands, gazing at it intently, and as she gazed, its brightness gradually left it, and it assumed a cloudy, milky appearance.

Then she seemed to fall into a trance, and Colonel Tazewell waited for her to speak.

"Your son lives," she said, after a while. "He is in good health, and is a strong and well-grown young man."

"Where is he?" demanded the colonel.

"I cannot place him exactly. He is a great traveler. You may meet him any day, and probably you have met him before this. He is not far from you now."

"How shall I know him when I meet him?"

"I can tell you no more."

The seeress opened her eyes, arose deliberately, replaced the globe in its box, went to a cupboard, and helped herself to a pretty vigorous drink from a bottle of Hennessy brandy.

"There is one thing more, Madame Lavalette," remarked Colonel Tazewell. "There is one other

point about which I want to consult you, and if you will sit down again I will tell you what it is."

She seated herself, and again fixed her keen black eyes upon her visitor.

"I want you to understand me clearly and fairly," said the colonel. "If we are to do any business together, as I hope we may, it is best that you should know just what I think and mean. If you have tried to deceive me, I have not been deceived; but I do not say that you have tried to, or that you have not told me the truth. I simply say that I do not believe that you learned anything of what you have told me by examining my hand, or by holding that crystal and going into a trance."

"I supposed that you were a believer."

"I will tell you what I believe directly. I have paid you well for the performance you gave me; but that is not a drop in the bucket to what I am willing to pay you for what I want you to do for me, and for the information that I want you to give me."

"You are speaking plainly, sir, and I like that. Tell me as plainly what you want of me, and what you are willing to pay for it."

"I will do so. I have been informed that you know something about my lost child, and that you can put me on the track of him, so that I can find him. From what you have told me this morning I believe that my information was correct, and that you can aid me in recovering my lost son. If you will do that you may name your price, and I need only say that I am willing and able to pay you enough to make you comfortable all the rest of your life."

Madame Lavalette's black eyes glistened; but a look of discomfort and apprehension gathered on her wrinkled face.

Though she was not in need of money, and though there was a source upon which she could draw if she should be in need, she was a very avaricious woman, and there seemed to be a gold mine ready for her, if she could work it successfully.

Could she work it? That was one question which beset her. A more important question was—would she dare to work it?

These were the points that troubled her, and it was evident that she scarcely knew how to answer her visitor, as she was pulled in different directions by different tendencies.

"I don't know," she mumbled. "Perhaps I might help you, and I would like to if I could. I know something, as you see, and I might learn more. But there is something in the way."

"What is in the way?"

"I am afraid."

"What are you afraid of?"

"I can't tell you that; but it is something that anybody might be afraid of. I want to do something to help you; but I must think it over and must look about and inquire into some matters, as I shall have to move very carefully. Come back here in a month, and I will tell you what I can do."

"A month?" exclaimed the colonel. "It is impossible that I should wait so long as that."

"Two weeks, then."

"Nor two weeks. Please remember, Madame Lavalette, that there is plenty of money back of my proposition."

That was what worried the seeress, as she wanted that money badly, and it perplexed her to decide how she was to get it.

"One week," was her ultimatum.

"Let it be one week, then," said the colonel, as he arose to leave, "and remember, Madame Lavalette, that there is plenty of money for you if you want to earn it."

The planter returned to his hotel, and still kept his visit to the fortune-teller a secret from his daughter and from Clifford Darrell.

As he said, he had not been deceived by the fortune-telling mummery; but he believed that the woman was able to give him the information he wanted, or at least to set him on the right track, and he was only puzzled to know how or when she could be persuaded to put him in possession of that information.

Perhaps the wish was father to the belief, as it was quite likely that Madame Lavalette, having got hold of a portion of his history, could easily have guessed at the rest of what she told him.

CHAPTER X.

SANDYCRAW'S DEAR MOTHER.

MADAME LAVALETTE remained seated for some time after her visitor left her, and it is probable that in the whole course of her life she never looked more like a witch woman than at that moment.

Her face contracted, and her shriveled features twisted themselves into new wrinkles as she sat there, torn by conflicting emotions, by desire and fear.

She had not missed her opportunity; but she could not decide how she was to catch and secure it.

She was still considering this troublesome question, after stimulating her intellect with another glass of brandy, when there was a ring at her door-bell, and another visitor entered her sitting-room.

This was a younger man than Colonel Tazewell, differing widely from that gentleman in style as well as in dress, and in his bright eyes a close observer might have perceived, seeing the two together, a striking resemblance to those of the Creole fortune-teller.

The new-comer, in fact, was no other than Mr. Alexander Crawley, usually known as Sandycraw.

It was not at all surprising that a man of his profession should visit a fortune-teller, as gamblers are notoriously superstitious, and it was reasonable to suppose that some question of good or bad luck had brought him there; but Mr. Alexander Crawley seemed to be quite at home in the rooms of this fortune-teller, and he addressed her with the utmost familiarity.

"Good-evening, mother," he said, as he helped himself to a chair and lighted a cigar. "Are you not glad to see me?"

"Not a bit of it!" she answered, almost viciously.

"Well, you are a queer sort of a mother. Not a bit glad to see your son, and your only son at that. That is about as unnatural a thing as I ever heard of."

"There is nothing more natural. You know that I am never glad to see you, Alexander Crawley, because you are a Crawley. I hated your father so bitterly that I could never force myself to like his son, though he was my son, too. You are a gambler, as he was, and you have all his mean, selfish and brutal ways. My married life with him was nothing but misery until it pleased the Lord to send him into eternity by way of a steamboat disaster."

"That is a pleasant way of putting it, I must say."

"It was a pleasant thing for me that he went that way, though any other would have done as well. You are following in his footsteps, and the only point in your favor is the fact that you don't drink as hard as he did. It is lucky for some poor creature that you have no wife, as you would soon worry her into her grave. As you have nothing but a woman who don't belong to you, you don't dare to ill-use her, as she would pick up and leave you."

"This is truly a kind and loving reception," observed Sandycraw. "It is a good thing for me that I'm not a Prodigal Son, as I'd never get a smell of a fatted calf. I do think, though, mother, that you might as well give me a decent welcome, as I happen to be a rich man just now."

"How long will it last? Yours are the kind of riches that take to themselves wings and fly away."

"Not as much as you fancy. A good deal of money sticks to my fingers, and I always have enough. I did very well on my last trip down the river, and nearly as well on the trip up, and last night I walked into a faro bank to the tune of five thousand dollars. If you want me to share with you, old lady, you had better keep on the right side of me."

"I don't need your money," she answered firmly. "I can easily get enough to keep me, and if I want more, I know where I can get all I want."

"How long since Colonel Tazewell was here?" quickly inquired Sandycraw.

This abrupt question, coming right on the heels of the madame's statement about her ability to get money, was a staggerer.

If she could possibly be supposed to have blushed, she must have blushed at that moment.

Her face turned various colors, settling into a greenish yellow, and her eyes drooped, and her skinny fingers trembled.

"Did you hear me?" demanded Sandycraw. "I asked you how long since Colonel Tazewell was here."

"Colonel Tazewell?" she murmured. "What Colonel Tazewell?"

"Colonel Tazewell of Mississippi, a fine-looking old gentleman who once lost a child. You know well what man I mean. How long since he was here?"

"About an hour," meekly answered the old woman.

"I knew that he would come, you see," triumphantly rejoined Sandycraw; "for he has a loose tongue, as well as you, and I supposed that he had dropped in on you before this. Well, did you tell him anything?"

"Of course I did not."

"He wanted to know something, though? That was what he came for?"

"Yes, he wanted to know something, and I worked the fortune-telling racket on him, and got his money, and told him nothing more than he knew already."

"I am not sure that you ought to have done that, as it might lead him to suspect you of knowing more than you chose to tell; but I will let that pass. You mustn't go an inch further, though, old lady. If you betray any of my secrets, I will kill you, as sure as I am a living man. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, I understand you."

"And you also know what I mean: mother or no mother, I would kill you. Do you believe that I would do it?"

"I do believe that you are wicked enough to do that very deed."

"Then you had better bear that fact in mind and govern yourself accordingly. Now, old lady, as you understand me so well, and as I am sure that you mean to mind every word I say, I will drop that subject, and will ask you to do a little fortune-telling for me."

"What do you want to know, Alexander?"

"I am going on a little excursion—that is, I am going into a business enterprise—and I want to know how it will turn out. Will you run the cards for me?"

"Yes, if you will promise not to find fault with what I tell you."

"I won't grumble, if you are honest in what you tell me. I never do. Go on with the racket."

The old woman shuffled her cards, and proceeded to "run" them in the accepted style of her profession; but presently her dark face grew darker, and her skinny hands trembled.

"Better not go, Alexander," she murmured.

"Why not? What's the matter with the scheme?"

"I see signs of blood here, and there is death ahead. I can't seem to make out what manner of death it is; but it looks like a rope."

"Quit that!" roared Sandycraw, jumping up and spitting out a fearful oath. "Do you suppose I want you to give me any such not as that? You are trying to scare me, though you know that you might as well try to scare a milestone. If you are not going to give me a square deal, you may as well drop those cards."

"I am doing my best, Alexander, to tell you truth, as far as I can see it; but I confess that my sight is a little misty to-day. There is more here, and I find a warning in the cards."

"Give it to me straight then, and don't be doleful."

"Your excursion, or whatever you choose to call it, Alexander, may turn out well for you, whoever else may be harmed, if one thing is avoided."

"That's not so bad. I will be glad to know what I must avoid. Keep on giving it to me straight."

"I can only tell you what I see. This is what you must avoid. You are going to leave the city, and are to go down the river. You must have no fight or anything like a fight, before you get out of St. Louis. If you have a collision with any man or set of men, or any serious difficulty in that way, your enterprise will end in failure, and the failure may mean death. As I said, I see something that looks like a rope."

"Bother your rope!" broke in Sandycraw. "I told you not to give any more of that rot. Do you suppose that I am afraid of a fight?"

"I have not accused you of being afraid of a fight."

"I should hope not. As if a little thing like that could bother me. But there might be bad luck in a fight just now, the same as in a black cat or in a humpbacked man, and I will be careful of myself, because of the word you have spoken."

"It is a true word, Alexander."

"And now, old lady, I hope that I won't have to caution you any more against betraying any of my secrets that you happen to have got hold of. It would never be safe for you to do it. My friend and partner, Dave Wenham, who was more than a brother to me, left me a legacy of hate and revenge which I mean to work out to the utmost extremity, and there'll be a sorry job for any man or woman who tries to interfere with me. Remember that, now, old lady, and then you won't be likely to run against me and get hurt."

Sandycraw left the house, and the old woman again had recourse to her brandy bottle to quiet her agitation.

"To think," she muttered, "that I was ever the mother of such a son as that! It was a crime that I ought to be hung for. But I will get that money yet. There is a dark cloud hanging over Alexander Crawley, and before long it will burst."

CHAPTER XI.

A GENEROUS MAN'S TRAP.

MR. ALEXANDER CRAWLEY seemed to be in no wise dissatisfied with the result of his visit to his dear mother.

It seemed to him that he had put in the right word at the right time and in the right way, and thus had done a good piece of work for himself.

There was but one thing that troubled him, and that was her warning against indulging in anything in the nature of a fight before he could get away from St. Louis.

He was superstitious enough to give great weight to that prediction, if it might be so called.

"There may be something in it," he muttered. "There generally is something in what she says, and signs of that kind ought not to be disregarded, anyhow. Of course I can keep out of a fight if I want to; but it will be just as well to steer clear of those places where there is a chance of a row. I only hope that my fuss of last night with that Thedford sneak is not going to count against me."

In pursuance of his determination to avoid all chances of a collision with anybody, he did not

go near a gambling house, nor did he even enter a saloon, but went direct to a boarding house on Olive street, a respectable but unpretentious establishment.

At the door he inquired for Jack Jones, and was directed to a back room on the third floor, where he found that young man, who had just come in, as it was near supper time at the boarding house.

Jack was surprised at seeing Mr. Alexander Crawley there, and freely expressed his surprise.

"How did you find me out?" he inquired.

"I hope you were not trying to hide from me," suggested Crawley by way of answering that question.

"Of course not; but I did not suppose that you would take the trouble to hunt me—at least, not so soon as this. I was going to look you up or send you word as soon as I got settled."

"It was natural that I should want to keep track of you, and that was an easy thing to do. I inquired for you at the hotel, and was told that you had gone to a boarding house. Then I saw the man who took your baggage away, and got your address."

"I had an idea," observed Jack, "that you might not care to have anything more to do with me after I had determined to give up the business of playing cards for a living."

"That was a great disappointment to me, my boy, as you know; but it does not follow that I should go back on you because you went against my wishes. Are you really set in that new notion of yours?"

"Quite firmly, sir."

"It is a pity; I had looked upon you as a most promising pupil and had hoped to take you up to the head of the profession."

"I never had any taste for it, Mr. Crawley, and I would prefer what I may call more steady employment."

"There is much more money, Jack, in the trade that I brought you up to, than in any business you are likely to get into."

"Perhaps so; but there are too many other things connected with it; and it is seldom that a gambler leaves any money when he dies."

"So you don't believe in a short life and a merry one, but prefer to become a solid and stupid citizen. Have you quite made up your mind to that, Jack?"

"Quite so, sir, and I must say that I was glad of an excuse to break off."

"Every man to his taste. What do you mean to do now? How do you expect to earn your living?"

"I have begun to look for work, and hope that I will soon find something to do."

"I know what that means, Jack. If you have not found the prospect a dark one, you soon will. You haven't an atom of experience, and when you are asked for references you can only say that you were brought up as a gambler, and that your only acquaintances are gamblers, and then everybody with fight shy of you. If you succeed at last in getting a place as drudge clerk or errand boy at four or five dollars a week, you will be doing well. Do you think you can stand that?"

"I suppose I can, if I have to."

"Well, Jack, I don't think you will need to, as you shall have my help. I have been thinking the matter over, and I came to the conclusion that you would surely do what you said you had determined to do. So I thought it would be best for me to help you, rather than to hinder you, in the new line of life you have chosen."

"That is very kind in you, Mr. Crawley."

"As I have brought you up, Jack, I consider myself responsible for you. Well, I have looked about, and have found a place for you which I think will suit you, as it offers good pay at the start, with speedy promotion and more than that, if you take to the business."

"That is more than kind. It is ever so much better than I deserve."

"No, it is only natural. Don't you want to know what the business is?"

"Of course I do."

"It is on the other side of the river—that is the only objectionable feature. I have a friend over there who is a stock shipper and commission man, and he happens just now to want a smart and active young man. The work will be hard; but the pay will be good for a start, and, as I said, there are chances. If the business suits you, and you get the hang of it, I will let you have money for a partnership with him or some other man."

Jack Jones was more than grateful for this wholly unexpected streak of good fortune.

He had supposed that Crawley, angered by his determination, would abandon him, or even attempt to persecute him, and he had looked forward to nothing but hard times in his search for employment.

That a way should be opened for him so easily and so pleasantly had been far beyond his hopes, and he spoke his gratitude simply but strongly.

"Just tell me how to catch hold of the scheme," said he, "and I will pounce on it like a duck on a June bug."

"You will have to go over there to-morrow night, Jack. My friend is kept away by his

business until about midnight, and you must be at his place at that hour to catch him. A little way south of the bridge, and near the river, you will find a small frame building, with a sign that reads, 'John Manning, Agent.' It is easy to find, as it is just opposite the only saloon in that neighborhood. If Manning is in, there will be a light in his windows. If you don't see the light, wait till he comes. Tell him your name, and say that I sent you, and then you can arrange your business to suit yourself."

This was quite satisfactory, and when Crawley had left him, Jack Jones went down to his boarding-house supper in high spirits, greatly pleased with an independent existence away from gambling.

The next day he could think of nothing but his new career, and he walked about the streets the greater part of the day, carefully keeping away from his former haunts, and waiting for the time when he was to cross the river and call on Mr. John Manning.

On Washington avenue in the afternoon he met Clifford Darrell, who greeted him warmly, and expressed great delight at meeting him.

Jack was also glad to see a man who had shown such a friendly interest in him, and was easily persuaded to speak of himself and his prospects.

"So you have actually quit the profession of gambling for good and all," remarked Darrell. "I am glad of it, and I fully believe that you will have no cause to regret your determination. I need not say that you are doing the right thing, as of course you know that you are."

"It surprised me that Mr. Crawley was willing to stand by me," observed Jack, "and I think it was remarkably good in him to help me."

"It seems so, and he must be a better man than I had taken him to be, though I must confess that I knew very little about him. Perhaps I may be of some use to you, too, as my father and I are acquainted with many people in the stock business, though we run mostly to mules and horses. When do you say you are to see this Mr. Manning?"

"I have to be over there at midnight to-night."

"That is a queer hour at which to meet a business man; but I suppose he has to attend to receiving and shipping his stock at night, and he is probably a rusher. Suppose I go over there with you?"

"I will be very glad to have your company, Mr. Darrell."

"And I will be glad to go. Call on me, then, at the Planters' House, and we will make the trip together."

Jack Jones did as he was requested to do, and the two young men, who had by that time become friendly, started to walk across the bridge together.

The night was dark, both moonless and starless; but the air was just cool enough to be pleasant, and they enjoyed the walk greatly, conversing as they went in a manner that tended to cement their newly-formed friendship.

On the Illinois side, in the straggling, half-built, and somewhat unpleasant town of East St. Louis, they found it rather difficult to pick their way to the spot they desired to reach, knowing only the general direction, and the lights in that quarter being both few and poor.

After stumbling about in the darkness, and venting a few expletives upon the roughness and uncertainty of the track which they were obliged to follow, they came to some scattered shanties, which seemed to them to indicate the vicinity of the small frame house they were searching for.

"If you go into business in this neighborhood, Jack," remarked Darrell, "you will have to carry a lantern whenever you go out at night."

"A revolver, too."

"Yes, and I wish I had thought to bring mine to-night."

"And I was fool enough to leave mine at home. Let us hope that the place is not as bad as it seems to be in the darkness. Well, Mr. Darrell, if the business turns out to be a good one, I can stand the discomforts as well as the hard work."

"We must have reached the place we are hunting. There is a saloon on one side of the street, if this may be called a street; but it is closed."

"And there is a small frame house on the other side; but that is closed and dark."

"I don't see the sign that Mr. Crawley spoke of, Jack."

"Perhaps it is a little tin thing. We will cross over and see."

"Wait a moment, until I strike a match and look at my watch."

"It is nearly a quarter past twelve," remarked Darrell, when he had inspected his watch. "I suppose your man has not come in yet."

"Oh he may have come in and gone to bed."

"Well, if the sign is there, we will know what to do."

The two young men crossed over to the small frame house, but had hardly reached it when they were struck by a cyclone.

The cyclone was not a very severe one, being engineered by two stalwart men, who crept out from behind the building and threw themselves upon the wayfarers.

That is to say, the biggest of them seized Jack Jones, while the other menaced Clifford Darrell with instant annihilation if he should attempt to interfere with the performance.

Neither of them, however, was to be so easily scared or quelled.

Jack struggled manfully and to good purpose with his big assailant, while Darrell, who was a scientific fist fighter, pitched into the other with such vigor and skill as completely astonished him, and made him wonder if the wrong man was not about to be annihilated.

The chances were that the Kentuckian would soon have "got away with" his antagonist and have been able to go to the help of his friend, if it had not been for the sudden appearance on the scene of a third man, who rushed out from behind the house and immediately took a hand in the game.

Both Jack and Darrell recognized him at once when he came upon them as Mr. Alexander Crawley.

"Is it you, then, you miserable meddler?" he cried as he dashed upon the Kentuckian. "Take that for your pay!"

He delivered a telling blow as he spoke, and Darrell never knew how or with what he was struck.

It was probably a pair of brass knuckles, or a billy, as the young man fell like a log, and was permanently out of the combat.

Then it was an easy matter for Crawley and his two assistants to bind Jack Jones, choke off his cries, and drag him away to a small steamboat that lay at a little distance from the frame house.

After a little while Darrell came to his senses, felt of his head, and discovered that he had sustained no serious injury, having been merely stunned.

He got up with difficulty, made his way slowly and painfully back to the bridge, crossed over, and finally reached his hotel, quite exhausted by his efforts.

About an hour after the encounter at the small frame house Alexander Crawley also crossed the bridge to the Missouri side.

He was alone, and he frowned as if something worried him.

"Who would have thought," he said, "that Jack would have brought that meddling fool over the river with him? I ought to have killed him, and I would if I had not been afraid of worse luck. I wonder if that is the kind of fight or collision the old woman meant. It didn't happen in St. Louis, though, and there may be no bad luck in that."

CHAPTER XII.

MRS. CREBBS TAKES A HAND.

In the mean time Mrs. Mollie Crebbs, or Crawley, was nursing her wrath against the man whose wife by brevet she had been, and was racking her brain to devise a scheme for avenging the deaths of her father and brother.

It was she who had so speedily set Dan Thedford on to quarrel with Crawley and kill him, and the man would have been well paid if he had succeeded.

She did not see why such a game should not be played upon Sandycraw as well as upon any other man, when the assailant was careful to keep all the advantage on his side, and it would probably have been played to some purpose if luck had not intervened in Sandycraw's favor.

She first learned of the failure of this scheme from Crawley himself, and she was hypocrite enough to congratulate him upon his deliverance from a great danger.

As a matter of fact she was glad that the plan had miscarried, because she felt that to visit death upon Crawley in such a way would not begin to give her the revenge she wanted.

Her appetite for revenge grew by what it fed on, and all her hours, even when she was with him, were spent in studying schemes for the satisfaction of that ravenous appetite.

If she had known of any crime that he had committed, by giving information of which she could have secured his death upon the gallows, she would gladly have seized the opportunity; but nothing of the kind was within her knowledge except the killing of her father.

That killing, though it had been reported as a fair duel, seemed to her to be a great enough crime to deserve hanging; but she knew enough of the law to perceive that a crime committed in Kentucky could not be punished in Missouri.

Perhaps, too, it would not be considered a crime in Kentucky, and at all events it would be necessary to go there to invoke the interposition of the law, and the thought of its formalities and delays appalled her.

No, there ought to be something else. There must be something else, and she would wait and scheme for something that would give her a surer and completer revenge.

She had noticed in the printed reports of the tragical affair down yonder that a Colonel Tazewell of Mississippi had acted as her father's second in the duel that had ended fatally for him, and she had afterward seen in the list of

"Prominent Arrivals" at the hotels the name of that same Colonel Tazewell.

She was one woman who read the newspapers carefully, and profited by what she found in their columns.

It occurred to her that it might be a good plan to call on Colonel Tazewell, represent the case to him in its true light, and ask his advice as to the best means of punishing the slayer of her father.

This idea suited her so well that she would have hastened to use it, if an unforeseen necessity for staying at home had not enabled her to make a new discovery.

This necessity was the arrival of Crawley with two of his friends, whom she was compelled to entertain, providing supper for them, and otherwise rendering their stay agreeable while they remained in the house.

Scarcely any task could have been more distasteful to her, as the two visitors were persons whom neither she nor anybody else could respect, and she was sure that she utterly despised them.

Their names were Ben Somes and Berry Sanders, and they were notorious crooks, who could not be counted even among the lowest class of gamblers.

They were both strong and able-bodied men, but were toughs from Toughtown, and it surprised her greatly that Sandy Crawley should condescend to associate with them, much more receive them in his house and admit them to his table.

As she considered this strange matter, she came to the conclusion that there must be some mischief on foot in which those two toughs were to be employed, and she naturally wanted to learn what it was.

If there should be any criminal entanglement in which she could catch Sandy Crawley, then her revenge might come to her in a satisfactory manner.

She had a good chance to find out, too, and did not scruple to improve it.

Shortly after supper Crawley took his two friends into a room which was set apart for his private use, and which was known as his "study," though it was precious little studying that he ever did there or anywhere else, unless it was combinations of cards.

It happened that the bath-room adjoined the "study," and that it was a perfect "whispering gallery" as far as that room was concerned, any word that was uttered there in an ordinary tone being easily audible in the adjoining apartment.

So Mrs. Crebbs-Crawley, when the three men had gone into the "study" and closed the door, insinuated herself into the bath-room and listened.

She heard enough to surprise her as well as deeply interest her, and this is a portion of what she heard:

"That confounded cub of mine," said Crawley, addressing himself to Berry Sanders as the more intelligent of the two, "has made up his mind to go back on me and the business I have brought him up to, and you know that I can't stand that."

"Of course you can't," observed big Ben Somes.

"After all the trouble and expense I have had with him, of course I can't be expected to stand any such racket as that, and I don't mean to. So I shall settle his hash for him, once and for all."

"Them's words with the bark on, and the right kind o' words, too," remarked Somes again.

"They are words that I mean to stick to, too. I have set a nice little trap for the young duffer, and he will fall into it as easy as rolling off a log. At twelve o'clock to-night he is to be at a lonely spot on the other side of the river, and you two will be there to pick him up and take him aboard the Gazelle. Does that suit you?"

"Of course it does," answered Berry Sanders. "It is as easy a job as we could ask for."

"I will go with you to show you where to post yourselves and tell you what to do; but I want you to understand that I am to have nothing more to do with the matter, and am not to show up at all."

"That's all a-settin', boss," assented Ben.

"There is big money in it for you, boys, outside of what I offer you as a sure thing. After we skip away from St. Louis on the Gazelle we will be free to go where we choose, and nothing can catch us. There will be a fine pile to divide if we strike that bank at New Madrid right, and I can see nothing to hinder us from getting the swag and getting away with it. We will leave the young duffer behind to bear the brunt of the racket, and the Gazelle will carry us out of harm's reach."

"It's a big thing, Sandy, as you picture it out," observed Berry Sanders, "and I for one will be glad to go into it."

"And here's one that'll be more'n glad," chimed in Ben. "I've been dead froze for a good job, this long time."

"It is settled, then, and after we get away from here, and when the young kicker is safe in a Missouri jail, Colonel Tazewell may search in St. Louis all he wants to."

"Who is Colonel Tazewell?" inquired Sanders.

"A man who seems to be anxious to mix himself up in my business. Nothing in the detective line, though. I will meet you to-night, boys, at the corner of Fourth and Pine."

"Say at Shady Wilson's," suggested Ben.

"At Shady Wilson's, then, and we will go over the river together."

The conference ended with this, and Mrs. Crebbs-Crawley hastened to slip out of the bath-room and place herself where Crawley would expect to find her.

She was more than ever convinced that duty as well as interest required her to seek out Colonel Tazewell, to whom she could give some information that might prove valuable to him, and at the same time might get from him some advice that would prove valuable to her.

Naturally, she was nervously anxious to get away, but was compelled to wait and conceal her impatience.

After Crawley had dismissed Sanders and Somes, he remained at the house until it seemed to her that he must surely miss his opportunity; but he knew what he was about, and went away when he was ready to go.

Then it occurred to her that she had forgotten the name of the hotel at which Colonel Tazewell was stopping, and she discovered that she had mislaid the newspaper that contained that item of intelligence.

She had a long hunt for the paper, and when she found it the hour was so late that it would be impossible for her to make herself ready and get to the planter's house before midnight.

By that time Colonel Tazewell would probably have gone to bed, and it would surely be too late to take any measures for interfering with Crawley's schemes.

So she was obliged to curb her impatience again, and make herself content with waiting until morning.

Early in the morning, however, she was up and away, so that she might catch Colonel Tazewell before he left his hotel.

In this she succeeded, and she asked for a private interview on important business, which was granted, and she told her story, repeating almost word for word the conversation which she had caught in the whispering gallery of a bath-room.

Colonel Tazewell was surprised and perplexed; for he really did not understand the matter at all, though he had some lively suspicions of his own, which this story had strengthened.

"I don't know," he said, "how that man comes to mix me up in his affairs, though I am inclined to think, from what you say, that I may have more to do with them than I had supposed. I met him on a steamboat, and that is really all I know about him. If I could be sure, now—"

"Oh, you don't know whether to believe my story or not," broke in Mrs. Crebbs. "Well, I haven't any references, and have only my word to give you for the truth of what I have told."

"I have no thought of disputing your word," answered Colonel Tazewell. "I am only puzzled and perplexed, and scarcely know what to think."

Just then the story Mrs. Crebbs had told received a startling corroboration.

Clifford Darrell, who had arisen and repaired the damages to his person so as to make himself presentable, sought Colonel Tazewell, eager to make known his adventure of the previous night.

His story was soon told, and it tallied so exactly with the statements of Mrs. Crebbs that the last vestige of doubt was swept from the mind of Colonel Tazewell.

CHAPTER XIII.

ON THE RIGHT TRACK.

THERE was silence for a time after the connection of these facts had forcibly struck the three persons present.

Colonel Tazewell looked at Clifford Darrell, and Clifford Darrell looked at Colonel Tazewell, and Mrs. Crebbs looked at both of them.

The colonel was the first to break the silence, and he addressed himself to the woman.

"Do you know," he asked, "who the person is who was spoken of by Crawley as the young duffer?"

"Of course I do," she answered. "He is Jack Jones, Sandy Crawley's pet, the one he calls his cub, the same young man who went over the river last night and was snatched up by him and his partners."

"Do you know where that young man came from?"

"I don't know anything about him, except that Sandy Crawley has had that boy since I knew him, and has been training him to be a gambler."

"And now, when he proposes to quit that noble profession, his trainer is scheming to commit a crime and leave the young man in a Missouri jail."

"That's about the size of it, colonel, if you will excuse me for talking in that style."

"What shall we do about this, Mr. Darrell?" inquired the colonel, who seemed to be rather

helpless in view of the developments that had come upon him.

"There is just one thing to do," answered Darrell, who was then quite bright and wide awake. "I have been thinking right sharply since I put the story of Mrs. Crebbs and my own experience together, and it seems to me that there is just one thing to do."

"What is that?"

"Crawley must have taken Jack Jones down the river on a steamboat, which is probably a private boat of his own, chartered by him, or got hold of in some way. His mention of the Gazelle can mean nothing less than that. What is to hinder us from chartering a boat and going in pursuit of the gang?"

"That is just the thing," eagerly exclaimed Mrs. Crebbs.

"But I don't know anything about that sort of thing," protested Colonel Tazewell, "and I don't know whether a boat is to be had, or how to get it."

"I will fix that for you. I will send or bring you a man who knows all about that sort of thing, and who will attend to the business for you straight through. His name is Dan Thedford, and he hates Sandy Crawley worse than p'ison. I will pay part of the expenses of the boat, too."

"There is no question of money with me," observed the colonel.

"But there is with me. I have money, and am willing to put it in toward bringing Sandy Crawley to justice, and I will tell you why. I believe you were present, Colonel Tazewell, when he killed a man named Scatchell down the river."

"Both Mr. Darrell and I were there," answered the colonel.

"But you, as the paper says, acted as Mr. Scatchell's second in what was called a duel. Was that anything but a murder?"

"Really, Mrs. Crebbs, I don't catch your meaning. It would not be considered a murder except by those cranky people who object to duels. I am willing to admit that it did seem to me, for a moment, that Crawley fired just a fraction of a second sooner than he ought to; but I might easily be mistaken, as I am not so young as I have been, and the others said that it was a fair fight."

"I knew it," exclaimed Mrs. Crebbs. "I was sure that there had been foul play somewhere, and that it was nothing less than a murder."

"I don't think you ought to say that, madam," objected the colonel. "What interest have you in that affair, anyhow?"

"The deepest interest. Did not that duel, as you call it, come from the death of a young man who had been swindled and ruined by Sandy Crawley in a game of cards?"

"I believe it did."

"That's what the paper said. The young man who killed himself was my brother, and the old man who was murdered by Sandy Crawley was my father."

"Heavens and earth!" exclaimed Colonel Tazewell. "And you have been, and still are, as I understand it, living with that man!"

"Never you mind that. I have been watching and waiting for my time, and I believe it will come soon. It seems to me, Colonel Tazewell, that we had better quit talking and go to work. I will go and find Dan Thedford, and will bring him to you right away."

"And I will go to the levee," said Darrell, "and find out whether there is any steamboat named the Gazelle, whether she has been here lately, and, if so, when she left the port."

Mrs. Crebbs and Darrell left the hotel together, going in different directions; but the former returned long before the latter got back.

She brought with her Dan Thedford, who showed plainly the effects of his encounter with Sandycraw, but was more vicious than ever, and more determined to get even with the man who had "downed" him more than once.

When he had heard the combined stories of Clifford Darrell and Mrs. Crebbs, filtered to him through the medium of that lady, he was not at all surprised, but considered the statements with an appearance of intense satisfaction.

He hastened to supply an important part of the information which Clifford Darrell had gone out to gather.

"I know all about the Gazelle," said he. "She is a small side-wheel boat that was built by a gentleman of this city as a sort of a yacht. He got tired of it, and wanted to sell it, and I happened to know that this man Crawley had been trying to get it. The other night—I have the best of reasons for remembering the time—Sandycraw broke a faro bank here in town to the tune of five thousand dollars, and right away he closed the bargain with the owner of the Gazelle, and got possession of her."

"Do you suppose that he has gone down the river on that boat?" inquired Colonel Tazewell.

"From what I have heard," answered Dan, "I judge that he has done that very thing."

"If he has gone, it is supposed that he took the young man named Jack Jones with him. Now, Mr. Thedford, I want you to tell me, fairly and squarely, if you know anything about that young man—that is, about who he is and where he came from."

"Well, I can't say that I do. Sandy Crawley came here from Cincinnati, and the lad came with him. I never heard him or anybody else say who the young fellow was or where he came from, and I supposed that Sandy had picked him up somewhere and taken him under his wing. Are you particular in wanting to know more about him, colonel?"

"I am very anxious to know."

"There is one person who would be able to tell you, I reckon, if she could be got to speak."

"Who is that?"

"Sandy's mother."

"His mother! Do you know where she is to be found?"

"Yes; it is easy enough to find her. The old woman is a sort of a fortune-teller, and she does business under the name of Madame Lavalette."

"That woman?" exclaimed the astonished planter.

"That very woman. Do you know her?"

"I know something about her. Is it possible that she is Crawley's mother?"

"It is a fact that she is. Sandy has kept the relationship as shady as he could, but I caught onto it some time ago. Oh, yes, she is his mother, sure enough; but I am strongly inclined to believe that she wishes she wasn't."

"Now I know who it is that she is afraid of, and why she is afraid."

"What is that, sir?" inquired Thedford.

"It is something that we need not trouble ourselves about just now, as we have plenty of business on hand that requires our immediate attention. Do you know of any steamboat that can be got—such as will suit the purpose of following Crawley and his gang?"

"Yes, sir, I can get hold of the very craft you need. She is a stern-wheeler, small but swift, and is laid up just now because of a lack of business. You can get her cheap, together with a crew to run her."

"Hurry up and secure the boat, then. I see no other way of reaching those rascals than by water, and there is no telling where we may have to follow them."

"I want to ask Dan Thedford one question," remarked Mrs. Crebbs.

"Shoot it off quick, then," answered the gambler.

"Outside of cards, Dan, did you ever know or hear of Sandy Crawley being engaged in any crooked work?"

"Never in anything that the law could get hold of."

"But this last scheme of his is the crookedest of the crooked. What does he mean by it? Why does he go into it?"

"Well, Mrs. Crebbs, I judge that his usefulness in his profession has been impaired, as the newspapers say, by what has been published about that shooting affair that is called a duel, and of course he understands that. People who know him will fight shy of him on the river. But that's not enough to account for his going into business as a crook, and I can only guess that he does it because he wants to get that young fellow into hock."

"Why does he want to make trouble for Jack Jones?"

"If this gentleman here can't tell you, I reckon you will have to ask Sandy's mother."

"I may as well inform you," said Colonel Tazewell, "that I now believe, what I have heretofore suspected, that the young man who is known as Jack Jones is my son, who was stolen from his home when he was an infant; but I do not know why that man Crawley should have evil designs upon him."

"If nobody has any more hard questions to ask me," remarked Dan Thedford, "I will go and look after that steamboat."

"Mrs. Crebbs went out also, after stipulating that she should like to accompany the expedition.

Clifford Darrell came in before noon, and reported that there had been at St. Louis a small steamboat called the Gazelle; that she had gone across the river the previous night, and since then had disappeared.

As he had discovered that New Madrid could be reached by telegraph, and as the Crawley gang would have a pretty long start of any possible pursuers, he had sent a dispatch to the authorities of that town, advising them to look out for the Gazelle, and watch the proceedings of those on board.

Dan Thedford, having *carte blanche* from Colonel Tazewell, easily secured a little stern-wheel steamboat of the kind known as a fly-up-the-creek, and had her manned and provisioned for the proposed expedition in the shortest possible space of time.

CHAPTER XIV.

BRIGHT PROSPECTS FOR JACK JONES.

The Gazelle was, as Dan Thedford had described her, a small side-wheel steamboat that had been built for a pleasure-boat, and was almost a miniature copy of one of the big New Orleans lines.

She was quite fast for a little boat; but her cabin room and other accommodations was contracted and inconvenient; and that was what had disgusted her owner with her, and caused him to sell her to Mr. Alexander Crawley for less than half the amount she cost him.

She was an admirable craft, however, for the present purposes of Sandycraw and his partners, who felt as free as birds of the air when they found themselves on board of her and under way.

Without crossing back to the St. Louis side, she left the Illinois shore early in the morning, just before dawn, quietly and secretly, and almost if not quite unnoticed.

There was a merry party on her, too, when she steamed down the river, and all were quite jolly with one exception.

The crew consisted of two pilots and two engineers, with three colored men who were to act as firemen and roustabouts, one of them being detailed as cook and steward.

The head pilot and head engineer were men whom Sandycraw could easily rely upon for assistance in his plans, whatever they might be, and the rest of the crew could be easily managed.

Besides the crew there were four persons on the Gazelle—Sandy Crawley, Ben Somes, and the person who has been named as not being as jolly as the rest.

That person was Jack Jones, who had suffered no serious damage in his encounter at East St. Louis with Sandycraw and the two toughs.

He had been carried on board the Gazelle in good condition, and had been deposited in one of the tiny state-rooms, from which he was not allowed to emerge.

As he then knew that Crawley was responsible for his capture, and that he had been lied to most abominably in order that he might be decoyed to a quiet spot where he could be easily picked up, he naturally wondered for what purpose this outrage had been committed.

He could only guess that Crawley, angered by his determination to quit card-playing as a means of livelihood, had decided upon getting him more completely within his power, and therefore had caused him to be caught and carried away from St. Louis.

Yet it seemed to be hardly necessary that to accomplish such an object as that such a network of lies must be woven, and the young man could not divest himself of the impression that there must be something more than that in the scheme.

It was not until after the Gazelle had passed Cairo that he received any information on this point.

In the meantime the other three, though somewhat incommoded by the narrowness of their quarters, were not disposed to grumble at them, and they passed the time in quite a jolly manner.

Among the stores with which the Gazelle had been abundantly provided was a goodly supply of wines and liquors, the wine being for the special delectation of Sandy Crawley, and the liquor for his assistants, who did not object to this discrimination in favor of "the boss."

So they drank at their leisure, and smoked Sandy Crawley's cigars freely, and made themselves more than comfortable.

As the Gazelle had no freight to carry, she had taken on a plentiful supply of coal before leaving St. Louis, and all she had to do was to steam swiftly down the Mississippi, stopping at no town or landing, and quite independent of everybody and everything.

It has been said that it was not until the boat had passed Cairo that Jack Jones received any enlightenment concerning the cause of his capture and detention, and it was not until then that he was released from his confinement in the little state-room.

Then Ben Somes let him out, and inducted him into the small cabin, where Mrs. Alexander Crawley was seated at a table, with a bottle of wine and a box of cigars.

That gentleman wore a smiling countenance; but Jack had a heavy frown on his face, which spoke of an extreme unwillingness to be propitiated.

"Come in, my boy," said Crawley in his kindest and heartiest tone. "Make yourself quite at home, as you are heartily welcome."

"It is a queer sort of a welcome," objected Jack.

"Rather peculiar, I admit, especially at the start."

"Something more than peculiar, I should say."

"Rather violent, perhaps you mean. Well, it was a little that way; but it can be easily explained, and I am sure that the explanation will suit you."

"I shall be surprised if it does."

"A more pleasant surprise is waiting for you as I hope. Now, Jack, try to shake off that sour and gloomy look, and sit right down here; and help yourself to a glass of wine and a cigar, and I will tell you all about it."

Jack did not object to the wine and the cigar, as he had not yet been favored with any such luxuries during the voyage, and he was more than curious to know what explanation Crawley could make of his very peculiar conduct.

So he helped himself freely to the wine, and lighted a cigar, and the frown on his face gave place to a look of expectancy.

"It was rather rough on you, Jack, I admit,"

Crawley began; "but it was all for your good, my boy, as you will admit when you are through with this bit of experience."

"I have heard that eels sometimes admit that it is a good thing for them to be skinned," observed Jack.

"I am not treating you as an eel, my boy, and I don't think that there has been any skinning done so far. It is your future that I have been looking after—the great point of discovering who you are and where you belong. You have often asked me about that, and I have not been able to tell you, simply because I did not know, though I had suspicions of my own, and had got hold of clews that I had been following up for a long time."

"You might have said something to me about it," remarked Jack.

"It would have been a wrong thing to do so, as I had nothing but guess-work to go on. Now I believe that I am on the right track, and that I have got a good grip on the real clew. The other day I received a letter from a man down in Missouri—a man whom I have been trying to get hold of for more than a year. He says, or at least hints very plainly, that you are the only son, and of course the heir, of a wealthy planter, from whom you were stolen when a child."

"Then I am not a waif and a stray and a nobody," eagerly exclaimed Jack.

"I never supposed that you were. I always believed that you were something better than that, but had no way of proving my belief. The man who wrote to me said that he would furnish satisfactory proof if I would pay him a reward, which I am more than willing to do. But he appears to be a very mysterious person, and I am to meet him at night at an appointed place in the town of New Madrid. This boat belongs to me, Jack, and we are making a pleasure trip, which I hope and believe will end greatly to your benefit."

It must be admitted that the young man was for the moment carried away by this fine prospect and by the artful manner in which it was described to him.

Immediately, however, it occurred to him that Crawley's statement was not a sufficient explanation of his violent abduction.

"I am very thankful to you, sir," he said, "for the trouble you have taken in my behalf; but I must say that I don't see why I should have been kidnapped."

"Is that the way you put it?" demanded Crawley in an injured tone.

"It is the only way to put it. Why you should have invented that story of the stock business, in order to get me over to East St. Louis and pounce on me, is more than I can understand."

"Yet it is a very simple thing, Jack, if you will only lay aside your prejudices and think of things as they are."

"It don't seem to me that I am prejudiced, sir. I can't see why you should have taken all that trouble to induce me to go with you, when it would only have been necessary for you to tell me what you have told me to-day."

"The truth is, my boy, that after you had formed that very virtuous resolution against gambling, and had shown a disposition to go back on me to any extent, I was justified in believing that you would look with suspicion upon any attempt I could make to induce you to go aboard any kind of a steamboat with me, and would refuse to stir; so I was obliged to use what I may call strategy."

"That is one name for it," answered Jack; "but it does seem to me, speaking as mildly as I can, that you took a good deal more trouble than was necessary."

The young man, indeed, was not at all satisfied with Crawley's explanation of the kidnapping.

He was strongly inclined to believe that the elaborate lie that had been told him, and the act of violence to which it had led, had been resorted to for some sinister purpose, and it was natural that this belief should cast a cloud upon the bright prospects that had been disclosed to him.

If Crawley had lied in the beginning of the game, it was reasonable to presume that he was not to be believed in the middle of it.

If his last story was a lie, as the other was admitted to have been, why should it not have been told in place of the tangled scheme that was worked in St. Louis?

In Jack's opinion that would have answered Crawley's purpose quite as fully as the other; yet it was possible that Crawley might have thought differently.

The young man could no longer place entire confidence in any statement that was made by Mr. Alexander Crawley; but his conclusion was that there could be no harm in the trip anyhow, and that he might as well wait and see what came of it, keeping his eyes open and watching for symptoms of any further foul play.

CHAPTER XV.

THE TRIP OF THE GAZELLE.

It was just as well for Jack Jones that he had come to the conclusion to take things as he found them, and to make the best of his present

circumstances without worrying more than was necessary.

He easily recognized the fact that there was nothing else for him to do.

It would be impossible for him to get away from the Gazelle and his companions without jumping overboard and swimming ashore, and that would be a difficult and dangerous performance, as well as one that appeared to be unnecessary.

Besides, it was possible that Crawley had spoken the truth this time, and nothing was more natural than that Jack should wish to learn the actual facts of that business.

If it should turn out as Sandycraw predicted and almost promised it would, he could never be sufficiently grateful to that gentleman for his kindness and the trouble he had taken.

So the young man urged no more objections, and expressed no more suspicions, but made himself at home with the others, and almost succeeded in making himself agreeable.

It was night, though an early hour of the night, when the Gazelle approached New Madrid, and then she did not go near the town, but quietly tied up at the bank in the bend above, where she was not at all likely to be noticed.

Hardly had the landing been made when a man came aboard who seemed to have been waiting for the boat, as he was right there on the spot, and there was no other person nor any habitation in sight.

He seemed to be, to judge by his face and his general style, a man of the same stripe as Ben Somes and Berry Sanders, and he probably was, as there could be no doubt that he was well acquainted with them.

Sandycraw also knew him, and invited him into the after part of the little cabin of the Gazelle, where the new-comer had a conference with Mr. Alexander Crawley and his two assistants.

Jack Jones was not invited to that conference, and did not appear to be wanted there, so he kept out of the way, and was obliged to content himself with wondering what was going on.

If he could have heard the conversation of the four men, the feeling that would have animated him would have been something different from mere curiosity.

"Well, Jimsey, how's things?" was the inquiry that Sandycraw addressed to the Gazelle's visitor.

"All right, Sandy—couldn't be better. The job is only waitin' fur you folks and the right time o' night."

"How about getting into the bank?"

"That's all dead open and shut—mostly open fur us. It's the sweetest and easiest little crib to crack that any professional gentleman ever set his eyes onto. The watchman'll be put dead to rights with the turnin' of a finger, and all we've got to do is to walk in an' help ourselves."

"How about the safe? Is that easy to get into?"

"Easy as rollin' off a log. It's one o' these here tin-clad arrangements. Fire-proof it may be, and it ought to be, as it don't begin to be proof ag'inst professional gentlemen as knows their business. Oh, the safe won't bother us. We'll go through it without stoppin' to spit on our fingers."

"But the money, Jimsey? Is the game going to be worth the powder it costs us to kill it?"

"Well, that's one o' the resks we have to run, you know, and it's about the only one, to my thinkin'. I can't really say what the swag will amount to, but I judge that it will pan out right well."

"I am sure that it will, and I don't see anything to hinder the whole scheme from working well. Now, Jimsey, you had better go right back to town and look after things, and take Ben Somes with you. Berry and I will be on hand at the right time with the young chap, and then you know what you will have to do."

"That's all a-settin, Sandy. Bill Simmons is watchin' the crib now, and he and I will work the rest of the racket safe enough."

The man named Jimsey was treated to whisky and a cigar, and then he went ashore with Ben Somes, and they soon disappeared in the darkness.

Sandycraw did not fail to satisfy Jack's curiosity about the visitor and the conference; but what he told the young man differed considerably from what had actually occurred.

"It strikes me, Jack," he said, assuming a very friendly and confidential tone, "that I have got that business we were speaking of, dead to rights, and I now feel almost confident that we will soon find out who you really are and where you came from, and will be able to prove it."

Jack's face brightened, as the speech and manner of his supposed benefactor were well calculated to impress him with a feeling of hopefulness.

"As soon as I got the letter I spoke to you about," continued Sandycraw, "I telegraphed to an acquaintance of mine in New Madrid to spot the man and watch him closely. I also told my friend as near as I could when the Gazelle would get here and where she would land, and asked him to be here to meet me."

"Why did we not go on and land at the town?" inquired Jack.

"Because I was afraid of some sort of crooked work on the part of my correspondent, and I wanted to come on him, as I may say, somewhat unawares."

"Was the man who met you here the one you had telegraphed to?"

"Yes—did you observe him closely?"

"I took no particular notice of him, but thought he looked like a tough."

"He has been, I suppose; but now he is on the other side of the fence. His name is Everson, and he is a sort of private detective. He tells me that he found the man who had written to me, made his acquaintance, and learned from him that he was waiting here for a person, to give him some information and receive a reward from him. Of course I am that person. Everson has been shadowing the man carefully, and tells me that he believes that he is straight and has no other purpose than that he disclosed in his letter to me. I have just sent Ben Somes to New Madrid with Everson, so that I may have another pair of eyes on my mysterious correspondent."

"Was that what brought you those two toughs from St. Louis for?" asked Jack.

"I brought them because, as I said before I was afraid of some sort of crooked work on the part of my correspondent. You know, Jack, that there are plenty of people who go in for a reward, whose aim it is to grab the money that is offered, without giving in return what is paid for. I am not going to submit to any imposition or robbery of that kind, and have taken careful measures to guard against it. Everson and Ben Somes will watch the man until you and I go to meet him, and then they and Berry Sanders surely ought to protect us against any brace game."

"Am I to go with you to meet him, then?"

"Of course you are. What do you suppose you are here for? The man who is to give the information, and is to receive the reward, says that there is a mark on you by which he can identify you, and of course I want to be sure of the quality of the goods before I pay the money."

"If there is any kind of a mark on me," observed Jack, "I don't know what it is."

"There must be a mark, though, or my informant is a liar. Well, my boy, we will soon strike him and find out what metal he is made of, though I am almost sure that there is a big change in life before you."

"If it does prove to be for my benefit, I will thank you for it all the rest of my life," said Jack, who had one of his grateful fits on just then.

"As I said, we will know all about it before long, and now we had better have something to eat and drink, as we don't know what may happen to us before we get back here."

Mr. Alexander Crawley probably had a pretty good idea of what might happen; but Jack Jones had by that time become quite suspicious, and he was filled with the idea of establishing his identity, and he was therefore willing to accompany Crawley to New Madrid, or anywhere else.

CHAPTER XVI.

ANOTHER TRAP.

BEFORE leaving the Gazelle, Mr. Alexander Crawley gave particular instructions to his engineer and pilot, to the effect that the fires must be kept up, with everything prepared for an immediate start, and that no person must be allowed to leave the boat.

It was near midnight when Crawley went ashore with Jack Jones and Berry Sanders, and they soon struck into a road that led them direct to New Madrid.

The Earthquake City was then quite a neat and compactly built town, and the bank which was the objective point of Crawley & Co. was of course in the center of the business portion.

The night was dark, and the streets were both quiet and dark.

If there were any guardians of the peace about, they were not visible, and it was not to be expected that they would make any trouble for the enterprising burglars.

Sandycraw passed the bank without seeming to notice it, and went to the corner beyond with his two companions, where he halted and looked about.

"It seems to me, Jack," said he, "that this must be the place where my correspondent promised to meet me; but I am not sure, as it may be a block or so nearer the river. If you stay here awhile and watch for him, I will go further down the street and look for him in that direction."

"How shall I know him?" inquired Jack.

"What is he supposed to look like?"

"That is more than I can tell you, though I might have asked Everson if I had thought of it. If a man comes along here and inquires for Mr. Crawley, that is your customer, and all you will have to do will be to bring him down the street to me."

"Very well, sir. I will wait here for him."

"Ben Somes will be near at hand to help

you in case foul play is intended, and Hanley and Sanders will be near by to guard against accidents."

"I am not afraid of any one man," answered Jack. "But I wish I had a revolver."

"Haven't you got one, then?" asked Crawley.

"Of course I have not. Do you suppose I would have been picked up so easy in East St. Louis if I had been armed? By the way, Mr. Crawley, what became of my friend who went over there with me, and who was mixed up in that very unpleasant encounter? I ought to have asked about him before now, as he was a good friend of mine; but I was so upset in one way and another that I hardly had my senses about me."

"If you mean the meddlesome young chap that we met on the boat, he is all right. Nobody has hurt him, and he just picked himself up after what you call the encounter, and went away. It is strange that you haven't got a revolver, Jack, as you have carried one ever since you were fifteen years old; but it is not a bit likely that you will need anything of the kind to-night; so I will go along and leave you here to watch."

Sandycraw went back down the street, not to look after his imaginary correspondent, but to give his attention to the attempt upon the bank.

To his great delight he and his friends had there what might be emphatically termed a soft thing.

The most important part of the work had been arranged in advance by Jim Hanley and another accomplice, who had located in New Madrid and made themselves at home there.

The watchman, as Hanley had intimated, had been "fixed," and all the conspirators had to do was to open the door, leaving proofs of burglary in the act, close it carefully, and go to work on the safe.

For this purpose they had brought a sufficient quantity of the best implements known to the profession of burglary, and, as the safe had been truthfully represented to be tin-clad, it was quite an easy matter for such experts as Berry Sanders and Ben Somes to get inside it.

While they were at work Sandycraw kept watch for them, and any intruder would have been sure to suffer severely at his hands.

When the safe was opened, the value of its contents surprised the industrious workmen, who were obliged to call in Sandycraw to decide what should be done with the "swag."

He was also surprised, and with good reason.

The officers of the bank, having balances to meet at St. Louis and the East, had prepared bundles of currency and securities for the purpose, which were to be sent off the next day.

In the mean time they rested securely in the safe which was fire-proof but not burglar-proof, and fell an easy prey to Mr. Alexander Crawley and his friends.

Sandycraw, called in to decide what should be done with this plunder, set at work with the skill and celerity of an expert.

He speedily picked out the packages of currency—paper and coin—and the available securities, rejecting such as could not be negotiated or might be traced, and stuffed them into the bag that had held the burglars' tools.

Those ingenuous and somewhat costly implements were left there as if they had been of no value, to induce the police of the vicinity to believe that the work had been done by high-toned professionals.

The value of the tools, indeed, was not to be thought of, compared with the worth of the plunder.

Having settled this matter with the greatest possible expedition, Sandycraw hurried his companions out of the building, and he himself carried the bag which held the results of their burglarious industry.

On the outside the coast was still clear, no policeman being in sight; but Jim Hanley and another started up, eager to know the result of the inspection of the bank by these unauthorized examiners.

"It's all right, boys," answered Sandycraw, answering their quick questions.

"What does it amount to?" demanded Hanley.

"I don't know. We have not had time to count it or even to guess at it."

"How will we get our share?"

"You will get it safe enough and square enough. I hope you're not worrying about that. As soon as we strike a secure place, I will let you know what it is, and you can get your share just when or how you want it."

"All right, Sandy. There's honor between us, I reckon."

"There ought to be, anyhow. But we must hurry back to the boat and slide off from here before anybody catches on to our little mystery. You know what you have to do, Jimsey—you and your partner. Is the young duffer up yonder yet?"

"He was there five minutes ago."

"You must go to him, then, within about fifteen minutes, and do just what I told you to do. Remember that besides your share of the

swag, you will get what I promised you for the other job."

"All right, Sandy. You can bet your two eyes that I'm fly."

Sandycraw hurried away with Berry Sanders, and was soon out of sight of New Madrid.

They rapidly made their way back to the Gazelle, boarded her with the bag of plunder, and discovered greatly to the satisfaction of the chief of the expedition, that Crawley's instructions had been strictly observed.

There was plenty of steam in the one boiler, the two small engines were ready for work, and every person who belonged on board was there and ready for duty.

Nobody questioned Crawley concerning the absence of Jack Jones, and nobody questioned anything he chose to do or say.

Within five minutes after his arrival with his partner, the little gang-plank was hauled up, the line was cast off, and the Gazelle, striking across to the other side of the river, was steaming swiftly down the stream, unnoticed by anybody at or about New Madrid.

Jim Hanley lingered for a little while in the neighborhood of the despoiled bank, then joined his partner, Ben Somes, who was stationed a little further up the street, and the two went toward the corner where Jack Jones was supposed to be watching for Mr. Crawley's unknown correspondent.

The young man was there yet, but was getting very impatient, and was nearly ready to leave his post and go in search of the man who had placed him there.

He had scarcely ever, if ever, known time to pass so very slowly.

He had kept his eyes and ears open, and had looked and listened with the closest attention, but nothing had rewarded his patient watchfulness.

There was nothing to be seen or heard, nothing but silence and comparative darkness—only the quiet houses and the sleeping town.

The minutes were extravagantly long, as not an incident occurred to break the monotony.

Jack was upheld for a while by the hope, instilled into him by the wheedling words of Sandy Crawley, that he would meet there the man who was to solve the mystery of his identity and tell him who he was and where he came from; but in the course of time that hope began to die away, and was succeeded by a painful doubt.

He wondered, as he had been in the habit of doing, of late, and the longer he waited the bigger his wonder grew.

It was no wonder that he wondered, and that the doubt born of his East St. Louis experience increased rapidly.

Was Crawley's correspondent a fraud, or was he a myth?

Had that man lied to Crawley, or had Crawley lied to Jack Jones about him?

If the gambler was the liar, he had lied deliberately and with a purpose.

What was the purpose, then, and what could he expect to gain by a lie that was so complicated, not to speak of its costliness?

The more Jack thought of it, the more he was mystified, and the more he wondered at the nature and object of the quite probable lie.

He had plenty of time to think of it, and the circumstances, though irritating, were favorable to careful and accurate thought.

Putting things together, since the elaborate lie that had been told him concerning the stock business, considering the crookedness of the people on the Gazelle, and the queerness of things in general connected with her trip, and especially considering the fact that during a wait of nearly an hour by his watch, he had seen nothing of any such person as Crawley had told him to look for, he was almost driven to the conclusion that he had been lied to again, and for a purpose which he could not fathom.

He had about made up his mind to go back down the street and look for Crawley, when he was startled by loud and sudden cries:

"Murder! Police! Robbers!"

This was a sample of the yells that came from the direction in which he had started.

Was it true, then, as Crawley had suspected, that the interview arranged for him by his correspondent was a "plant," and that an attempt had been made to rob him, the crime being further complicated by a murder?

If so, it was strange that Crawley, with the aid of Jim Hanley and the two St. Louis toughs, had not been able to defeat the attempt and punish the scoundrels.

Jack was ready to go to the assistance of that excellent gentleman, only regretting that he had no revolver.

He had turned for that purpose, when he saw two men running toward him, uttering the same yells that had startled him.

"What's the matter?" he eagerly inquired, as they came near him.

There was no answer until the two men were right at him, as they seemed to be out of breath, and then it came in a shape that astonished him.

"Here's one o' the robbers!" shouted the foremost man, who was none other than Jim Hanley. "Grab him, Ben!"

Jim Hanley and Ben Somes seized the young man, who more than ever at that moment regretted the absence of his revolver.

His surprise was such that it is probable that he could not have prevented the sudden seizure with a weapon, and without one he was almost powerless.

His ineffectual struggles were soon overcome, and his hands were tied behind his back, while the two men continued to yell "Police!" at the top of their voices.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE TIGHTNESS OF THE TRAP.

JACK JONES was more than astonished by his sudden and unceremonious capture.

He was utterly indignant, with that impotent indignation that grows more violent because it cannot find the vent it wants.

The meaning of the scrape he was in had not yet begun to dawn upon him, and he was naturally anxious to get hold of it.

What had become of Crawley and his friends? If they were anywhere about there, they surely must have heard those cries, and why had they not come to learn what they meant?

He did not waste any time in useless speculation, but proceeded to inquire into the matter as soon as he found himself in jeopardy.

"What does this mean?" he angrily demanded. "Why have you jumped on me here and snapped me up in this style?"

"If you don't know, young feller," gruffly answered Hanley, "I reckon there ain't nobody as does."

"I don't know anything about it. Are you going to tell me what it means?"

"Just you wait till the police come along, if there's any police in this here town, and then you'll find out all you want to know."

The police of New Madrid were few in number, and those few were probably good resters: but the persistent cries of Jack's two captors soon brought a straggling official upon the scene, together with several occupants of the neighboring buildings who had been aroused by the tumult.

These turned out with their weapons in their hands and ready for action, though they were but partially clothed, and they reached Jack and his captors just as the straggling policeman came up.

Seeing one man bound and in the grasp of two men, they poured forth a flood of questions, eagerly demanding to be told what was the matter.

"That is just what I want to know," put in Jack Jones. "I heard these men yelling murder and that sort of thing, and when I went toward them to learn what it meant, they pounced on me and collared me, though I had been standing quietly on the corner, and had not seen a soul until I met them."

"Queer that you should have been standing on the corner at this time of night," observed one of the citizens.

"It ain't so queer when you come to find out what he was here for," answered Jim Hanley, "and I'll tell you what the matter is. The bank down thar has been robbed."

This announcement, to use a forcible if not elegant expression, was enough to knock New Madrid cold.

The citizens present, including the policeman, stared with wide open eyes, and for a moment were incapable of expressing their feelings.

That the bank should have been robbed was something new in their experience, and it is doubtful if another earthquake would have shocked the town more completely.

Again they poured forth questions, aided by other citizens whom the excitement was bringing to the scene.

Jim Hanley was more than willing to answer the questions, and ready enough to tell the story as Mr. Alexander Crawley wished it to be told.

"Me and Ben Somes," said he, "was a-comin' up the street to-night, after bein' out late because of a bit of card-playin' foolishness, and when we got along this way we saw three men walkin' out o' the bank, and one of them had a sort of a carpet-bag."

"Those were the burglars," remarked the solitary policeman with an air of authority and superior knowledge.

"Of course they were. Bein' in the detective line myself, I knew that the bank had been robbed as soon as I set eyes on 'em."

"Why didn't you arrest 'em, then?"

"Arrest nothin'! They was three to our two, and loaded with weapons which you know they was ready to use. And that wasn't all. Afore we got nigh 'em they'd slipped out of the bank and scooted off so fast that it would ha' took a trottin' hoss to foller 'em."

"Which way did they go?"

"Right around the corner of the bank and up that way," answered Hanley, pointing toward the north.

"They couldn't get off fast that way, unless they had hosses nigh at hand."

"That's for you to say, as you ought to know more about it than I do. But I reckon that if you folks want to ketch the scamps, you'd better light right out and chase 'em as hard as ever you can."

This hint was immediately acted on by several men in the crowd that had collected.

They separated from their companions, and hastened to get horses and go in pursuit of the robbers.

Their preparations, however, took time, in addition to the time that had been already lost.

The pursuers had scarcely made their start when the Gazelle had left the Missouri shore, and shortly she was out of sight in the darkness, steaming rapidly down the Mississippi.

"What did you do then?" inquired the policeman, addressing the man who posed as the hero of the occasion, and who was quite willing to accept any honors and emoluments that might be connected with it.

"That's jest what I was goin' to tell you," answered Hanley. "Just as these three robbers skipped out I noticed a man lyin' on the walk, and thought he was dead. Lookin' closer, I saw that he was alive, but gagged and tied. Then we heard a whistle, and saw this man start to run. It was plain enough that he had been left on the corner by his pals to keep watch and see that the coast was clear, and that when they had finished their work they whistled to him to skip out. So Ben Somes and I ran up and nabbed him."

"That's a lie," broke in Jack Jones. "There was no whistle that I knew anything about. I heard these men yelling, and I started toward them to ask what was the matter, when they jumped on me and held me."

Jim Hanley's incredulous smile was reflected by the countenances of the bystanders.

"What was he waiting there on the corner for, anyhow?" one of them wanted to know.

That was a serious question, and there was but one answer to it in the minds of all except the unfortunate Jack Jones.

He was well aware of the state of public opinion as there represented, and it was not at all clear that he would be able to change it.

If he should tell the truth and the whole truth, it was not likely that anybody would believe his story.

Besides, it had begun to dawn upon him that he was trapped again—that Crawley and the two St. Louis toughs were the bank burglars, and that he had been left in the lurch to bear the brunt of their misdeeds.

If this should prove to be the case, the only story he could tell to account for his presence there and then would connect him inevitably with the burglars, and would demonstrate the truth of the charge that had been brought against him.

In this condition of perplexity he naturally hesitated, and had no answer to make to the important question that was flung at him.

This hesitation of course complicated the case, and strengthened the suspicion against him.

"Give him plenty o' time, gen'lemen," observed his captor, "an' he'll be likely to fix up a yarn that will astonish you."

"Who are you, my friend?" the policeman asked Hanley. "I don't remember seeing you about here before now."

"Reckon you hain't been about much, then, in the daytime. My name is Henry Everson, and I am in the detective line, as I said, though I didn't come here on this business, not by a long chalk. That I just happened on accidentally. I'm from St. Louis last, and have been here a week or so, lookin' after a little matter of private business, and there's men here as knows me."

Jack Jones had no doubt that the man was lying straight along and all through, and he was almost sure that he had seen his face before, and lately.

As he had told Crawley, he had taken no special notice of the man who boarded the Gazelle as soon as she landed; but it struck him forcibly that this person who gave himself the name of Henry Everson was no other than the one whom Crawley had called Jim Hanley.

If he could only prove that, his course would be clear; but proof was impossible unless he could force the man to a confession.

At this he made an ineffective stagger.

"It seems to me that your name is Jim Hanley," he remarked, "and that you are the man who went aboard of a small steamboat several hours ago, and talked there with a man named Crawley."

"You're 'way off, young feller," replied Everson, who may for the present purposes of this narrative as well be called by the name he chose to give himself.

"You're 'way off, young feller. I don't know nothin' about any such steamboat or any such man. My name is Everson, as I said afore, and there's them here as knows me."

This statement was substantiated by more than one of those present, and the case began to look worse for poor Jack Jones.

Mr. Alexander Crawley had doubtless laid his plans very carefully, and had worked his scheme with a degree of skill that was worthy of a better cause.

CHAPTER XVIII.

IN THE TOILS.

By the time when Jack Jones had been utterly discomfited, greatly to the satisfaction of the

bystanders, the story told by Henry Everson, the alleged detective, had received further corroboration.

As soon as he made mention of a man who was lying bound and gagged on the walk, several men hastened down the street, and found there a man who was in exactly the condition that had been described, and he was soon recognized as the watchman of the bank.

His story was that he had been silently approached from behind, and had been seized and secured before he had a chance to defend himself.

He was sure that three men were engaged in this work, and declared that one of them had held a pistol to his head, while the other two had overpowered and gagged him.

The watchman, as Jim Hanley assured Crawley, had been "fixed" to some purpose.

The officers of the bank had been hastily aroused, and they had gone to their beloved institution, easily perceiving that somebody had been there before them.

When they looked into the open and devastated safe, knowing what had been there and what was missing, it was clear to them that the loss was a greater one than the bank could stand, and their grief and indignation were proportioned to the calamity.

The burglars' tools that were left in the building, few but of fine quality, were sufficient to tell the most inexperienced that the robbery was the work of men who were artists in their line.

Any satisfaction that might have been gleaned from a knowledge of this fact was entirely destroyed by the extent of the loss, and by the exasperating fact that the robbers had got safely away with their plunder.

There was no doubt that they had got safely away.

After a while the mounted men, who had gone in pursuit of the depredators, came straggling back to town, bringing the saddening report that there was no trace of those rascals, that they "hadn't found hide or hair of them."

It was impossible even to guess what had become of them, as they had gone afoot over a traveled road, and there was no such thing as trailing them or deciding where or how they had left the road.

Probably they had mounted fast horses, which they had concealed somewhere in the woods; but this was a point that could not be settled.

This being the mournful state of the case, the indignation of the losers and of the populace in general was naturally directed against and concentrated upon the scoundrel who had been caught.

Before the ineffectual pursuers returned to town, that scoundrel had been safely conveyed to the county jail and stowed away there, though a considerable number of the crowd, which had by that time grown to large proportions, advocated the summary justice of taking him to the nearest tree and hanging him off-hand.

Such a disposition of his case was prevented by the bank officials and local authorities, who preferred to keep him alive, not so much out of respect to the law, as in the hope that he might be persuaded to give the names of his accomplices, with such information as would secure their capture.

As for the plunder—well, in the bosoms of bank officers who have been robbed, hope springs eternal that they may get back at least a portion of their property.

Jack Jones seemed to offer the only basis for such a hope, and he was not likely to be hanged while the hope lasted.

Mr. Henry Everson, otherwise Jim Hanley, was in the mean time the hero of the affair, and a portion of the radiance in which he basked was reflected upon his friend Ben Somes, who rejoiced in it and made the most of it.

It was about daylight when Jack Jones was taken to jail, and by that time some of the saloons in the neighborhood of the bank had awakened to the exigencies of the occasion, and had opened their doors to the increasing crowd, who gladly availed themselves of the privileges presented.

Mr. Henry Everson and his friend Somes were made more than welcome in the saloons, being the observed of all observers and the treated of all treaters.

They were easily persuaded to tell their story frequently, and it was naturally expanded with the telling.

They were yet more easily persuaded to absorb such large quantities of tanglefoot, that Mr. Alexander Crawley, if he could have known what they were doing, might justly have feared acts of indiscretion on the part of one or both of them.

With Jack Jones the time did not pass by any means so pleasantly.

Nobody treated or petted him, and he met nothing but sour looks and harsh words, and the only request that he should tell his story came in the form of a rough intimation that he had better confess, as the easiest way out of the scrape.

Though he had nothing to confess, it seemed to him that his only resource would be to tell

his story as soon as he could get a fair chance to tell it.

He could not as yet understand the game that had been played on him; but by this time he was sure that it was a mean and shameful game.

Crawley had lied to him from the start, and he had been purposely brought to this box, dropped in it, and the cover shut down over him.

Crawley and the two St. Louis toughs, therefore, were the rascals who had robbed the bank and got away with the plunder.

If that were not the case, they would have put in an appearance when the alarm was sounded, and Jack would not have been in any manner of jeopardy.

As they had utterly disappeared, that point was settled, and Jack could no longer doubt what it was that he had to expect.

As he had been left in the lurch, and the butt end of things had been forced upon him, it seemed to the young man that there was nothing left to him then but to make a clean breast of it, and tell his entire story down to the time of his capture.

Of course he could not expect anybody to believe his story as he would tell it, or to regard it in the light in which he viewed it.

The trouble was that they would believe it just so far as it connected him with the bank burglars, and would pass the rest of it by as an idle or fraudulent tale.

Mr. Henry Everson had already warned them of what they might expect if he should be given time to fix up a "yarn."

Yet it had become firmly settled in the mind of Jack Jones, especially since he had determined to quit the profession of gambling, that the best way to do in difficult circumstances was to go straight to the truth, and tell it as plainly and honestly as a man might.

"Truth is mighty, and will prevail."

Sometimes it seems to prevail in the wrong direction, and the person who persists in sticking to the truth is treated like a fool according to his folly; but was it not safe to believe that he who told the truth would come out right in the end?

In this case the end might be the penitentiary, or even worse; but Jack Jones was fully determined upon telling the truth, no matter what it might lead to.

This was not altogether a pious and praiseworthy act, but it was probably the best thing he could do under the circumstances.

He did not get a chance to tell his story for several hours, and during that time he was compelled to endure the discomforts of a cell in the New Madrid county jail, as well as the annoyance of people who insisted upon it that he should confess.

As he had nothing to confess, he was more worried by this than a criminal might have been.

When he had a chance to tell his story, it was to severe critics, and before a hostile audience.

At about ten o'clock in the morning he was led forth and taken before an examining magistrate, to determine whether he should be held for trial on a charge of burglary in the very highest degree known to New Madrid.

Nobody doubted that he ought to be held for trial on at least as strong a charge as that; but the examination was a formality that had to be gone through with.

The first simple questioning was strongly against him.

What was his name?

"Jack Jones."

This was bad, as scarcely anybody could doubt that Jack Jones was a mere alias.

What was his residence?

St. Louis.

A stranger, and one who clearly had no business to be waiting on a street corner in New Madrid after the midnight hour.

What was his business?

He had been a gambler on the river, but at present he was in no business.

There were many citizens of New Madrid, if not most of them, who were willing and eager to bet on games and events of chance; but they did not consider themselves gamblers, and their opinion of professional card-players was anything but favorable.

A gambler out of business, too—what could he turn his attention to, if not to burglary?

Jack was asked if he was aware of the nature of the charge that had been brought against him.

He believed that he was, and hoped to be able to repel it successfully. He would like to have a lawyer, but he happened just then to be out of funds.

A young lawyer volunteered to defend him, and public sentiment, though it frowned on the offer, did not rule out the aspirant.

The examination began, and the testimony bore very hard against the accused.

Mr. Henry Everson, who had got a chance to lie down for a little while and sleep off the fumes of the liquor that had been poured into him, was the first and most important witness.

He told exactly the same story that he had

told after the capture of Jack Jones, and it was not shaken in the least by cross-examination.

Jack, through his lawyer, asked the witness a few questions.

Was Harry Everson his real name?

It was.

Had he ever gone by the name of Jim Hanley? Never.

Was he acquainted with a man named Alexander Crawley, familiarly known as Sandycraw?

He was not.

Had he ever been on board of, or seen, a small steamboat named the Gazelle?

No.

This ended the questioning of the alleged detective, and his friend Ben Somes then told his story.

Ben was a stupid, heavy-witted fellow; but he had sense enough to model his story upon that of his partner, and under the cross-examination of Jack's volunteer lawyer there was no essential variance from that supposed state of facts.

The watchman was called, and he told the story which he had given when he was released from his durance.

He knew that he had been seized from behind and gagged and bound by three men, whom he had not recognized and could not describe, and he was only sure of the fact that there were three of them.

Others told of the condition in which the bank building was found after the burglary, and the burglars' tools that had been found there were offered in evidence, and the bank officers explained what money and securities had been left in the safe, and what was missing after the felony.

This ended the testimony for the prosecution, and the prisoner had nothing to offer but his own statement, which he made in opposition to the advice of his counsel.

He had determined, however, to tell the plain truth and the entire truth, and that was what he proceeded to do.

He was obliged to ask the indulgence of the officials and others present, until he could give a full account of his supposed connection with the burglary, and of the unpleasant position in which he had been placed through no fault of his own.

To do this he had to begin at the beginning, telling about himself, the obscurity of his origin, how he had been brought up by Sandy Crawley as a gambler, and how he had finally determined to abandon that precarious if not disreputable profession.

Then, feeling that he was entirely cut loose from Sandycraw, he went on to tell how that individual, by an elaborate lie, had decoyed him over to East St. Louis, where he was kidnapped and carried on board of a small steamboat named the Gazelle, from which he was not suffered to escape.

He then related the story that Sandycraw had told him, by which he had been persuaded to go ashore and accompany his supposed benefactor to New Madrid.

There he was stationed on a corner to wait for a man who was said to be expected, while Crawley went further down the street to look for the same man, and Jack knew nothing about the burglary or any other trouble until he was pounced upon and captured.

Concerning the man who had been chiefly instrumental in his capture, he stated his belief that Mr. Henry Everson was really named Jim Hanley, that he was well acquainted with Sandycraw, and that he had boarded the Gazelle directly after she landed in the bend above the town.

This story Jack Jones told with abundant details, as seemed to him to be necessary, and the telling of it occupied a long time; but it did him more harm than good.

It was quite an incredible story, too romantic to gain any belief; and the only real conclusion to be drawn from it was the connection of the prisoner with the three men who were presumed to be the burglars.

Public opinion, as well as official opinion, was thoroughly against Jack Jones, and it looked as if the mightiness of truth was not likely to prevail.

But it is always a good thing to give truth a fair chance, whether the scheme appears to work at the first or not.

CHAPTER XIX.

TRUTH IS SOMETIMES MIGHTY.

MR. HENRY SCATCHELL, commonly known as Harry Scatchell, was a son of old Sam Scatchell, who had been killed by Mr. Alexander Crawley in what was said to be a fair duel, and was the brother of George Scatchell, whose losses under the manipulations of the same Crawley resulted in his suicide.

He was not yet twenty-one years old, and was a clerk and messenger boy, as well as a student, in a law office in an interior Arkansas town, when he received the sad news of his father's bloody death.

This came to him through Colonel Tazewell's letter, which at the same time informed him that the corpse had been shipped to Little Rock.

To that city Harry Scatchell went, received

the remains, and saw that they were properly buried, finding himself the last remaining member of his father's family.

He was a black-haired, black-eyed, and dark-skinned young man, thoroughly southern in his ideas and temperament, and the thought of revenge came to him naturally and clung to him closely.

He knew that his father had set out to hunt Sandy Crawley in order to take revenge for the death of his brother, and he had now learned how disastrously that attempt had resulted.

It was then incumbent upon him as a matter of sacred duty to avenge the deaths of both his father and his brother, and that duty he fully intended to perform, if he should lose his life in the attempt.

There was no hurry, as Crawley was not likely to escape; but the passion was hot in Harry Scatchell, and he made his arrangements as speedily as possible.

He told his story to Judge Arnett, the lawyer in whose office he was located, and explained his purpose, of which that gentleman fully approved.

"I am afraid that the chances are against you, Harry," said Judge Arnett, "and you will need to be very careful. You will want to have the law on your side, and the way to do that is to provoke your man until he starts to pull a weapon on you, and then you must be ready to get the drop on him and shoot him down in his tracks."

"I understand that," observed Harry.

"Very well; but it is one thing to understand it, and quite another thing to do it. I know that you are quick on the trigger; but I am afraid that the man you are hunting is a wicked one with a gun, and that you will get the worst of it."

Equipped with this advice, and provided with as much money as Judge Arnett could spare him, Harry Scatchell made his will, and started on his man-hunt.

As he had some business to attend to at a village near New Madrid, he decided that he might as well start in that direction, taking at the latter town a steamboat for St. Louis, where he hoped to get on the trail of Mr. Alexander Crawley.

He reached New Madrid the evening before the bank burglary, and, as he was very tired, he did not wake in the morning until the excitement was largely over.

Then he learned what had happened, and he became interested in the affair to the extent of going to the court-room to be present at the examination of Jack Jones.

In this he took merely a professional interest, until the prisoner took the stand and told his story.

As soon as Jack began to speak of Sandy Crawley, the young gentleman from Arkansas became deeply interested in the narrative, and thereafter listened intently to every word that was spoken.

When Jack had finished his evidence—if the statement that he made could be considered as evidence—Harry Scatchell whispered to the young lawyer, and then arose.

"By permission of the counsel for the accused," said he, "I wish to ask him a question or two."

No objection was made, and Jack declared his willingness to answer.

"Was this Crawley of whom you have been speaking the same person who killed an old man named Scatchell on the Kentucky shore, below Hickman, not long since?"

"The same man. They had a duel there, and a full account of it was published."

"And you insist upon it, Mr. Jones, that the same Crawley landed at New Madrid last night, or near New Madrid, on a small steamboat."

"On a little side-wheel steamboat named the Gazelle, which he lately purchased in St. Louis after breaking a faro-bank there. It was manned by seven men, and he had as companions two St. Louis toughs named Berry Sanders and Ben Somes."

These statements did not help the case of the accused in the least.

Indeed, the questions were not put for that purpose, as Harry Scatchell was considering only his own desires, and was anxious to get on the trail of Sandy Crawley.

Jack had admitted his connection with the men who were believed to be the burglars, and the rest of his story was too incredible to require serious consideration.

Therefore the magistrate easily arrived at the decision that the accused should be held in heavy bail to answer the charge of burglary.

This decision had hardly been arrived at when there came another piece of evidence, which corroborated Jack's story to some extent, though it did not help his case at all.

The captain of a boat at the landing had seen in the gray light of early dawn a miniature steamboat stealing across the river.

With the aid of an excellent glass, he had observed her closely, and had made her out to be such a craft as Jack Jones had described, her name appearing to be Gazelle, though he was not sure on that point.

This fact only tended to connect Jack more completely with the bank robbers, and it was clear that he had no friends in New Madrid, as even Harry Scatchell, who had shown some interest in him, was unable to sympathize with a protege of Sandy Crawley's.

But the truth sometimes gets in its work more speedily than it might reasonably be expected to.

Before Jack had been taken to jail, and while the witnesses and the audience were still present with the officials, there was an extensive arrival of strangers, whose presence and purpose there caused quite a commotion.

The strangers were one excited old gentleman of military bearing and highly respectable appearance; one excited woman, good-looking and well dressed; one bright young gentleman, eager and active; one man who was rather tough as to his looks, and who had little to say; and one middle-aged man, quiet and reserved in his demeanor, who merely looked around and seemed to take in everything and everybody in an unobtrusive way.

They made themselves known when it became necessary that they should, and in course of time they were discovered to be Colonel Tazewell of Mississippi, Mrs. Crebbs of St. Louis, Clifford Darrell of Kentucky, Mr. Dan Thedford of St. Louis, and one other man who was quite an important person at that time and place.

That man's name was Amos Harding, and he was a member of the regular detective force of the St. Louis police, who had been permitted, under the persuasion of Colonel Tazewell, to accompany the expedition.

They had come down the river, making as good time as possible, and had of course been too late to catch the Gazelle, though their presence promised to be useful in more ways than one.

As soon as they landed, their questions had brought them information of what had happened and what was going on, and their previous knowledge of what might be expected enabled them to get hold of the situation very easily.

As soon as they learned the position in which Jack Jones was placed, they hastened to the building in which his examination was going on, which happened to be a lower room in the County Court House, and pressed forward eagerly to take part in the proceedings.

The proceedings were, as a matter of fact, finished when they arrived; but a magistrate's preliminary examination is a court of equity, rather than of strict law, and it was easy enough to re-open the matter when the object of the visitors became known.

Clifford Darrell shook hands with Jack Jones, whom he greeted warmly, and he and Colonel Tazewell hastened to find out what proceedings had been taken, and what evidence had been given in.

To this Mr. Amos Harding listened in his quiet and unobtrusive way, but at the same time kept two sharp eyes of his own wandering among the spectators in the court-room.

It was a singular fact that one of the principal actors in the drama of the morning—in fact, the leading and best applauded actor—noticing the presence of Mr. Amos Harding, and perceiving the two sharp eyes of that gentleman wandering about the room, began to sidle away as if he intended to remove himself from the locality.

Indeed, to use an expression common to that part of Missouri, he was "took with a leavin'."

It was another singular fact, that as soon as Mr. Henry Everson showed a disposition to slide off in that way, Mr. Amos Harding was there in front of him, blocking his path, and fixing upon him a look of mild but firm persuasion.

"I want you, my friend," observed Mr. Harding.

"What do you want me for?" indignantly demanded Mr. Everson. "I ain't got nothin' to do with you nor none o' your sort."

"You are mistaken, my friend. I am the very man who has something to do with you just now."

"Say, fellers, here's one of that robbers' gang who wants to snap me up and knock out my evidence. Are you goin' to allow that sort o' thing?"

Mr. Everson appealed to the crowd who had been petting and treating him, and the crowd closed about him; but the quiet gentleman from St. Louis paid no more attention to the crowd than if they had been a swarm of flies.

Ben Somes came savagely forward to the assistance of his friend; but a look from Mr. Amos Harding seemed to act upon him more forcibly than a blow.

Several people with threatening looks hustled about Harding and the man he had pounced upon; but Harding took no more notice of them than if they had not been there.

He had fastened a steely grip upon the coat-collar of Mr. Henry Everson, whom he jerked right forward, regardless of anybody who stood in the way, and brought him into the presence of the magistrate, who was just then talking to Colonel Tazewell.

"Was this man a witness in the case which you have just heard?" demanded Harding.

"He was," answered the justice, who was known as Judge Hopper. "He was the main witness in the case."

"Then, sir, I respectfully request that he shall be held for further examination, as I may have something to tell you about him."

An order to that effect was immediately made, and Mr. Henry Everson was put in the custody of a constable—a proceeding which displeased him more than he cared to tell.

His partner, Ben Somes, seeing a chance of trouble ahead, had taken advantage of the temporary disturbance to leave the court-room and make himself scarce.

Colonel Tazewell then made a little speech, ostensibly to Judge Hopper, but mainly to the audience, whose influence upon the proceedings was manifest.

"This young man," he said, "having no friends in your town, and nobody who knew him to speak a word for him, has had stranger's luck here, and by that I mean to say that he has not had the chance that he might have had."

"I admit, from what I have heard of the evidence, that the circumstances were very strong against him, and it is not a bit surprising that any or all of you should have come to the conclusion that he was implicated in that bank burglary."

"But I and the friends who have come here with me have good reason to believe that he is not guilty, and we propose to show you if we are allowed to do so, that this affair is the result of a conspiracy on the part of the men who robbed the bank, to get him into trouble and make him suffer for their sins."

"We have come here at a pretty heavy expense, hoping to be able to crush that conspiracy in time, and before we left St. Louis we sent you notice that we were coming."

"What kind of a notice did you send?" inquired Judge Hopper.

"My young friend here, Mr. Darrell, sent a telegram to your sheriff, saying that we would come down as soon as possible, and asking him to look out for a small steamboat named the Gazelle, and to watch the men on board of her if she should land here. Is it possible that the telegram was not received?"

"I suppose it got here all right, colonel; but the sheriff has been out of town for some days, and it is likely whoever received it for him, judging it to be a private dispatch, didn't open it."

At this point the proceedings were interrupted by the arrival of Sheriff Heilman, who had just returned to town, had opened the telegram in question, and had hastened to carry his rather old news to the center of interest.

The contents of the telegram were such as Colonel Tazewell had stated, with the addition of a hint at possible bank robbery.

"I now request," said that gentleman, "that the examination be reopened for further evidence on behalf of the accused. As this sort of proceeding is usually and necessarily informal, I presume that there will be no objection to granting my request."

There was no objection, and Mrs. Crebbs, so-called, was introduced as a witness, Colonel Tazewell taking the case in charge, after a brief explanation to the young lawyer who had volunteered to act as counsel for Jack Jones.

Mrs. Crebbs told, just as she had rehearsed it to Colonel Tazewell, the story of the conspiracy plotted by Alexander Crawley, and arranged to be executed by him and Ben Somes and Berry Sanders, which she had heard from her vantage ground of the whispering gallery in the bath-room.

Fortunately there was nobody present who cared to question her concerning the cause of her presence there and the nature of her relations with Alexander Crawley, and she was not likely to volunteer any information on those points.

The only person who could have had any interest in questioning her was a young gentleman from Arkansas, Harry Scatchell by name, and he, since the arrival of the strangers from St. Louis, had in a measure effaced himself, retiring into a corner where he was invisible to the principal parties to the proceedings.

CHAPTER XX.

TRUTH TAKES A START.

THE testimony of Mrs. Crebbs had a strong effect upon the magistrate and the audience; but there was more to come, and Colonel Tazewell hastened to bring it forward.

Clifford Darrell was the next witness, and his evidence was also highly favorable to the accused, corroborating exactly the story that Jack had told concerning the kidnapping exploit in East St. Louis, as well as confirming to that extent the statements of Mrs. Crebbs concerning the conspiracy.

Colonel Tazewell followed, relating how Mrs. Crebbs had come to his hotel in St. Louis to tell him the story of the conspiracy, and detailing the subsequent proceedings which had finally brought him and his party to New Madrid.

Amos Harding then took a hand in the game,

and what he had to say was quite to the purpose.

After giving his name and profession, and telling how he had been allowed to accompany Colonel Tazewell and his friends on this expedition, he fixed his bright eyes on Mr. Henry Everson, and that individual shrunk under his gaze.

"As that man was the main witness in this case," said he, "I would like to know what he called himself and where he hailed from."

"He gave his name as Henry Everson," answered Judge Hopper, "and he claimed to be a private detective."

"Very private, I should say. I would thank you to ask him now if he was ever known as Jim Hanley."

"That is just what I asked him," broke in Jack Jones quite irregularly.

The proceedings, however, were generally irregular as well as informal, and this additional bit of irregularity was of no consequence.

"What did he answer you?"

"He denied that he had ever been known as Jim Hanley, though I was almost sure that I had seen him on board of the Gazelle, and that I had heard him spoken of by Sandy Crawley as Jim Hanley."

"I can easily settle that point," said Harding. "He has been lying right hard down here; but he won't lie to me. His name is Jim Hanley, and he is a well-known St. Louis crook. His picture is in the Rogues' Gallery there, and he has served time at Jefferson City more than once. If you want his full record, the Chief of Police at St. Louis will send it to you, together with his photograph."

The information furnished by the St. Louis official, fitting so well the statements made by Jack Jones, seemed to settle the character of Jim Hanley, *alias* Henry Everson, and no further evidence concerning him was needed from the St. Louis records.

He was immediately sent to the New Madrid county jail, on a charge of conspiracy, which would thereafter be put in shape.

This prevented him from further posing as a hero, shut off the drinks which he had been enjoying in that capacity, and put an end to his hopes of a reward for catching one of the burglars.

Judge Hopper, however, was in a greater quandary than any of the rest, as he had to decide upon conflicting testimony and upon conflicting interests.

As far as the evidence went, he was of the opinion that the story of Jack Jones was true, that a mean game had been played upon him, and that he ought to be allowed to go free.

Against this view of the case, however, stood the officials of the bank which had been robbed.

One of the robbers had been caught, or one who was reasonably supposed to have been connected with the robbers, and they were by no means disposed to let him go until they could prove his guilt or persuade him to disclose his accomplices.

The point was decided, as frequently happens in such cases, by a compromise.

It was settled that though Jack's guilt was by no means clear, he should be held for trial, but that his bail should be lowered to such a sum as could be easily procured through the influence of Colonel Tazewell.

The matter was satisfactorily arranged by that gentleman, and Jack Jones was turned loose to accompany his friends.

In the mean time there was another scene in the court-room which, though a quiet one, was both dramatic and painful.

It has been said that Harry Scatchell, after the arrival of Mrs. Crebbs, effaced himself from the proceedings, retiring into a corner where she could not see him, though he did not fail to watch her closely and listen to all she said.

When the case of Jack Jones had been settled he arose and approached her.

Her surprise at seeing him there was great, and was accompanied by signs of consternation.

"I had not expected to see you here," she said.

"And I had not expected to see you here or anywhere else."

"Or anywhere else! What do you mean by that?"

"I had hoped that you were dead."

"That is a very hard thing to say, Harry, to your only sister."

"What else ought decent people to hope for such a woman as you?"

"You are too cruel. Perhaps I am not as bad a woman as you believe me to be. I was lawfully married to the man with whom I left my home; but he deserted me shortly after the marriage."

"What else can a woman expect of a man with whom she runs away in that style? And since then, to judge by the story you have told here, you have been living with the man who killed your father and caused the death of your brother."

"Don't make it any worse than it is," she pleaded. "As soon as I learned what Crawley had done, I determined that he should be punished, and I have stuck to him because I meant to bring him to justice. This was my only ob-

ject. My only thought was revenge. It was I who discovered his plans, and who put our friends here on his track, so that he could be hunted down and given his deserts."

Colonel Tazewell came to the rescue of Mrs. Crebbs, confirming what she said concerning the valuable services she had rendered, and succeeded with the help of Clifford Darrell in persuading her brother to regard her rather more leniently.

"If it had not been for her," said the colonel, "we would not be here now; we would have learned nothing of Crawley's scheme to rob the bank here, and would have missed a fine chance to follow him up and bring him to justice. You had better join us, Mr. Scatchell, if you want to see that man punished."

"That is what I am here for. As soon as possible after I had buried my poor old father, I set out to seek his murderer, and I suppose it must have been a special Providence that brought me to this spot. Yes, Colonel Tazewell, you are right, and I am already under great obligations to you."

"You must remember, my young friend, that mine is a selfish search, and that I have ends of my own to accomplish, which I need not explain to you just yet. I shall be very glad to have your help if you will join me."

"That is settled, then. I shall have no more words of blame for my unfortunate sister, who may, after all, have been more sinned against than sinning, and I shall devote my best ability to your enterprise."

The next question was, what should the expedition do, and how should Crawley and his partners be pursued and captured?

There could be no doubt that the little Gazelle had crossed the river from the bend above the town, had gone down the Mississippi, and had not been seen to return.

Of course the Mountaineer, the small stern-wheel craft that had brought Colonel Tazewell's party from St. Louis, could follow the Gazelle, and she was there for that purpose with steam up.

So a party was quickly arranged, which was considered amply sufficient for the pursuit.

The only additions to the original number were Sheriff Heilman, of New Madrid, with two assistants selected by the bank officers, and Harry Scatchell.

Besides these there were Colonel Tazewell, whose years did not prevent him from being a splendid fighter, Clifford Darrell, Dan Thedford and Amos Harding.

Jack Jones was not counted, as he was not expected to take an active part against Crawley, in spite of the recent strange and treacherous conduct of the man who had brought him up, and Mrs. Crebbs was of course not considered as a possible combatant.

The men who were counted seemed to be an abundant force for the capture of Sandycraw and his two partners, and they hastened to board the Mountaineer and begin the pursuit.

Before the start the precaution was taken to send telegrams to all the towns along the lower river that could be reached, asking that the Gazelle should be watched and stopped, and that all on board should be arrested.

"I am afraid," observed Sheriff Heilman, "that we are going to have a long hunt, something like a search for a needle in a haystack."

"I don't see why that should be so," replied Colonel Tazewell. "We are behind them, and are bound to overtake them sooner or later."

"They may go on to New Orleans."

"What of that? They can't run their little boat out into the Gulf, and if they leave her we can track them on land. As long as they stick to the river we are bound to find them."

"But they may not stick to the river."

"Where will they go then?"

"There are any amount of creeks and bayous into which they can slip and hide."

"I had not thought of that. As you say, Mr. Heilman, it will be something like looking for a needle in a haystack."

"We have one big advantage over them, though," remarked Harding.

"What is that?"

"They don't know that they are pursued, and won't be likely to believe that they are."

"Let us hope that they don't and won't."

CHAPTER XXI.

ALL FOR REVENGE.

No reasonable person would have supposed that Sandy Crawley, who was known not only to his intimate acquaintances but to many others as a careful as well as intrepid gamester, a man who lost no chances, but took every step calmly and deliberately, whether engaged in a big game or a little one, could rush headlong into an enterprise that might land him in the penitentiary, or might even cause him to finish his career at the end of a rope in the control of a lynching party.

Although he was universally recognized as being absolutely without fear, a man of unquestioned grit, whom no odds could frighten, and who actually delighted in the presence of danger, yet he was not regarded as a person who

would rush into trouble simply for trouble's sake, or who would recklessly put himself within the possible grasp of the law.

Whatever he might be, he was not that kind of a man.

There had always been plenty of money for him in his trade as a professional gambler, and outside of the tricks of that trade he had never been known to display a proclivity toward any crookedness or common villainy.

Therefore, when he not only coolly and deliberately, but at a heavy personal expense, made a burglarious expedition to New Madrid, and actually ordered and joined in the commission of a bank burglary, there could be no doubt that he was actuated by some motive beyond the desire for plunder, though it may be supposed that he was willing to make his project pay by taking his full share of the proceeds of the crime.

The death of old man Scatchell, with the circumstances that led to it, which had been so fully and widely published, might have a tendency to make people shun him as a gambler with whom it was dangerous to come in contact; but no such apprehension would be sufficient to drive him to crime.

Of course he had an overpowering motive, and it is necessary to go back some twenty years in his life to discover that motive.

Sandy Crawley had been the partner and the most intimate friend of Dave Wenham, the high-toned sport who came to grief at the hands of Colonel Tazewell.

He had not only admired Wenham, who was considerably older than himself, but had looked up to him with absolute reverence as the brightest and nerviest man he knew.

When Wenham came to Crawley with his tale of the terrible indignity he had suffered at Colonel Tazewell's plantation, the wrath of the latter was aroused as fully as that of the former, and he was hot for revenge.

"I have already settled that," declared Wenham. "I have taken a vengeance which will be deep and lasting, and which will make that man repent his shameful deed to the day of his death."

"What have you done to him, Dave?"

"I have stolen and carried away his only son, his baby boy, and I mean to keep the child and use him to suit myself."

"How will that be?"

"I shall bring him up to be a gambler, or worse—surely no better—and when he is a man, with all the deviltry I can teach him ingrained into him, a candidate for the penitentiary or the gallows, I think I shall send him to that high-handed Mississippian, to be the comfort and delight of his old age."

Crawley pronounced his friend's scheme of revenge, a sweetly diabolical one, and cheerfully promised his valuable aid in carrying it out.

Dave Wenham did not live long enough to make his project a success.

When he learned that Colonel Tazewell was hunting him and was hot on the trail, he confided to Crawley what proved to be his last words and wishes on the subject of the boy.

"That man is bound to find me," he said. "One who travels as much as I do is sure to be overhauled. I could hide from him; but I might as well give up my life as do that, and hiding and running away are not in my line, anyhow."

"Nobody ever knew you to do anything of that sort," suggested Crawley.

"And I am now too old to begin. That man and I are sure to meet, and when we do, one of us will have to die. Perhaps I will be the one to go under."

"Not if you play your game for all it is worth."

"There is no telling what may happen, Sandy, and I have something like a presentiment that I am to go off the hooks. If I do, I want you to promise me solemnly that you will take up the contract where I drop it, and that you will train that boy as I meant to train him and make him what I meant to make him. If his father should kill me, you would be more than ever bound to do this."

Sandycraw gave the promise that was required of him, and shortly afterward the violent death of his friend added to the obligation a feeling of personal revenge.

Yet he was not as successful as Wenham had expected him to be, and as he had fully intended to be.

As the young man grew up, his guardian and guide in evil ways became fond of him and less inclined to pervert and harm him, though he steadily persisted in training him as a professional gambler.

Jack Jones, too, had inherited from good stock, a disposition that did not readily fall into crooked ways, and the life that he led, in spite of its excitement and variety, grew daily more distasteful to him.

It was the encounter with Colonel Tazewell on the Emperor, combined with Jack's sudden but firm resolve to quit card-playing as a business, that renewed in Crawley the sense of his obligation to his dead friend, as well as an ardent desire to work out his personal revenge.

He then determined that Dave Wenham's scheme should be carried out in all its original

bitterness, or even more cruelly than the dead man had intended.

If the young man refused to remain a gambler, he should become something worse.

To accomplish this, Crawley was willing to go to any expense that his object required, and even to sacrifice himself.

The cost of his expedition would probably be more than repaid by his share of the bank plunder; but it was still a serious question whether he had not greatly damaged himself, running into the very teeth of the law.

Yet the game had been played perfectly, and it was impossible for the schemer to find any fault with the working of the scheme.

It was a pity that Clifford Darrell had accidentally become aware of the abduction of Jack Jones; but that young gentleman could not know what had become of his companion, and there was nothing to connect Jack Jones with the Gazelle, or to connect the Gazelle with the bank robbery.

Of course when Jack was caught he would talk, and would tell his story to suit himself; but there would be two men in New Madrid to contradict his statements, and all the circumstances would be dead against him.

He would easily be convicted of being an accessory to the bank burglary, and when he should once be lodged in a penitentiary for a term of years, his future would be marked out for him, and such a future!

He would graduate from a college of crime, and would thenceforth be a convict and a vagabond, if not a confirmed scoundrel.

His father would be welcome to him then, and Dave Wenham would be avenged.

It seemed, then, that the schemer must have proved a fine success, if it had not been for Mrs. Crebbs, who had overheard Crawley's plot, and had put Colonel Tazewell and the others on his track.

Fortunately for the plotter's peace of mind, he knew nothing of that, and so he sailed away gayly in the Gazelle.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE SPOON LAKE TRIBE.

THERE was a jolly time on board of the little Gazelle after she left her hiding-place in the bend above New Madrid.

She steamed quietly across the river in the intense darkness of the early morning, getting as close as possible to the Tennessee shore, and there was hardly a chance that at that hour and the circumstances the departure or passage of the small craft would be noticed by any person at the town below the bend.

Yet she was seen from the Missouri shore by a pair of sharp eyes, and thus the strange statement made by Jack Jones was partially confirmed.

It is by such little incidents and accidents that the most skillful plotting and the most careful scheming are often overthrown.

Sandycraw and his partners had good cause to be jolly over the splendid success of their marauding expedition and their apparent condition of perfect safety.

The plunder which they had secured was found, when it was fully examined and its value figured up, to amount to a sum that was worth a big risk, and yet it seemed to them that they had run but little risk in getting hold of it.

There was enough to make a big divide all around, considerably more than they could have expected from such a "job," besides allowing for the expenses of the trip and giving the lion's share to the "promoter" of the enterprise.

As the boat was abundantly supplied with provisions and liquors, the successful raiders found plenty of occupation that pleased them, and had nothing to do but enjoy themselves until they should reach their destination.

What that destination was was known only to Mr. Alexander Crawley, and he was in no hurry to disclose it to his companions, and they were not anxious to be informed, as they trusted him implicitly.

The Gazelle kept close to the Tennessee shore for a considerable distance, and then passed over to the Arkansas side, gliding down the river swiftly and almost silently, and making no landing for any purpose.

This steady progress was kept up during the day and part of the night, and finally the little craft was tied to the shore just within the mouth of a creek, where it was not possible that she could be seen from the river.

Crawley then explained to his confederates that the point he meant to reach was a small lake at the head of the creek, about a dozen miles in the country.

There they would be as safe as a snake in his hole, as nobody would think of following them up there, and no other river craft could go where the Gazelle could go.

They would find friends there, too, and Ben Somes and Jim Hanley, who knew how to reach the spot, would make their way down there when they had got Jack Jones safely settled in the New Madrid jail.

Then they would divide the plunder, and the Gazelle would be run down to New Orleans and sold, while the marauders could separate and enjoy their easily earned gains.

This was a very convenient and comfortable arrangement, but there was much to happen before it could be carried into effect.

Just then it was necessary to tie up, as the creek was so small and shallow that even the Gazelle could not navigate it at night.

Early the next morning a start was made, and the crooked and difficult stream was slowly and carefully ascended until its source was reached.

This, as has been noted, was a lake, though if it had been situated somewhat further south it might have been called a bayou.

It was about three acres in area, irregular in shape, its shores mostly marshy, and the body of sluggish water surrounded by immense trees hung with vines and draped with moss, altogether a very lonesome and eerie looking place.

Lonesome as it was, and probably the abode of fevers and other miasmatic diseases, it was still inhabited, a fact which was speedily made evident when the Gazelle steamed out of the creek into the lake.

She landed at the shore where the bank was the highest, and there it was that the habitation was discovered.

It was a long and low log cabin, near the water's edge, very rudely built, and with no signs of comfort or care about it.

Plenty of signs, though, of slovenliness and neglect, which spoke of chills and ague-cake.

Plenty of signs, too, of human life in a queer state of activity, showing that the malarious locality was not fatal to the population, though their appearance was by no means indicative of health.

They were a numerous family, too, to occupy one house, and they represented three generations of Hitchleys.

There was old Hiram Hitchley, whom Sandy Crawley had known from his boyhood, a portion of the gambler's poverty-stricken and harum-scarum youth having been passed near that very piece of water, which was known to the scanty inhabitants of the region as Spoon Lake.

There was Hiram Hitchley's wife, a thin and hard-featured woman who was seldom seen without a cob pipe in her mouth.

There were Hiram Hitchley's three sons, with the wives and children of two of them, and there was his daughter Sally, with her husband, Joe Dillenger, and their children.

Quite an imposing array they formed, though there was nothing interesting about them, except for such as can be interested in ignorance and ugliness and uncleanness.

All the men and women were tall and gaunt, with yellow skins, and with clothing that a ragman would have scorned to pick up, and the almost unclad children, who tumbled over each other in their eagerness to see the wonder on the water, were copies in miniature of their elders.

Dogs were there, too, in abundance—hounds, yellow dogs, coon dogs and curs—and it looked as if there must be a dog for every member of the numerous family.

The Hitchleys were squatters, of course, and how they lived was known only to themselves, as they cultivated the soil to a very small extent, and that very badly.

In the woods there was game, however, and peltries were to be had for the trapping in the marshes and along the creeks, and whisky was cheap at a neighboring still.

There were sheep and cattle, too, on farms not far distant, which sometimes mysteriously found their way to the Hitchley homestead, where they disappeared.

The appearance of the Gazelle on the quiet water of Spoon Lake was as astonishing to the grown folks as it was to the youngsters, and none of them knew what to make of it.

The men and some of the women had seen steamboats on the Mississippi, but never any such mosquito craft as the Gazelle, and their wonder grew as they gazed at her, the object of her existence, and her purpose in seeking that secluded locality, being beyond their comprehension.

They brought out their rifles, long-barreled muzzle-loaders of an antique style, and stood as if they expected a hostile demonstration on the part of the intruder.

Their wonder and apprehension were changed to joyous greetings when Mr. Alexander Crawley appeared and made himself known to them.

He was the first to step ashore as soon as the little gang-plank was run out, and he hastened to shake hands with Hiram Hitchley and his wife and sons, to whom he spoke as if they were his oldest and dearest friends, and he had long been anxious to meet them.

"Why, Sandy Crawley!" exclaimed the old man, beaming with delight at seeing a friend from the outer world.

"Why, Sandy Crawley, this yer's enough to make a feller shed his eye-teeth. Never see'd the like afore, and wouldn't believe it now ef I hadn't see'd it. Never allowed to set eyes onto you ag'in in this mortal world, and here you are, puttin' on style enough to make an old man's head swim. How did you happen fur to light down onto us, and what is that purty thing that you come in?"

"That is a steamboat, Uncle Hiram, and my property. She is young and small yet, but I

reckon she will grow if I feed her and treat her well."

"Now you're jokin', Sandy. Them things don't grow."

"What's to hinder? I was going down the river on my boat, just for fun, and found myself near your place. So I thought I would step in and see you'n, as I believed the little craft could crawl up the creek, and here I am."

"That's enough to beat me outen a year's growth. Do you really mean to say that you came hyer just to see us poor critters?"

"Just to see my old friends," answered Crawley. "And perhaps to have a hunt with the boys, and get some good deer-meat."

"Then you ain't runnin' away from nothin', nor wantin' to hide nowhar?"

"Of course not. What could put such a notion into your head?"

"It useter be so when you was a boy."

"But I am a man now, and have outgrown that sort of thing."

"This knocks out my underpinnin'. I ain't doubtin' that it's true enough, as there's nothin' to be made of us; but it's mighty queer. Ain't it queer, Lizy?"

"Powerful queer," assented Mrs. Hitchley.

It was by no means an agreeable thing to Sandycraw that his motive in coming to Spoon Lake should be so seriously suspected, or that the real purpose of his presence there should be so closely hinted at; but he smoothed the matter over as well as he could, assuring the Hitchleys that he was merely on pleasure bent, and that his visit was entirely a friendly one.

"Ef it's a fair question, Sandy," queried the old man, "I'd like to know how much sech a steamboat as that 'un mought ha' cost?"

"I paid eight thousand dollars for her; but it cost more than that to build her."

"Eight—thousand—dollars! Great Scott! That sounds like a powerful sight o' money. You must be a mighty rich man."

"Not a bit of it, Uncle Hiram; but I am able to own that boat until I get ready to sell her. I bought her on speculation, you see, and hope to make money by her."

"Reckon you must kerry a heap o' money about on her."

"Not much. I need but little to run her, and I pay all my bills when I get back to town."

The questioning of the elder Hitchley had become decidedly suspicious, and there was a shade of avarice in it, if not of something worse.

Sandycraw began seriously to doubt whether he had not made a great mistake in coming to Spoon Lake, where his apparent wealth might arouse the cupidity of those semi-savages, and perhaps tempt them to try to take forcible possession of it.

Their ignorance was not innocence, and their friendship might naturally be tempered by greed.

He was glad when the old man saw fit to change the subject.

CHAPTER XXIII.

"A PANTHER IN THE PATH."

MR. HIRAM HITCHLEY did change the style of his talk, but not much for the better.

He wanted to know whether Crawley made all his money "playin' kyards," how much he "took in at a clip," whether he stopped his boat at towns along the river and "tackled the sharps" there, with other questions of personal interest that were more or less annoying to his auditor.

As his talk ran entirely upon the subject of money, Crawley perceived that the only way to choke him off was to take the game out of the old man's hands.

So he sailed in for his side, and fired such rapid and continuous volleys of questions as bewildered Mr. Hiram Hitchley, and forced him to cease his efforts in that direction.

Crawley then introduced Berry Sanders and his pilot and engineer to the Hitchleys, all of whom showed a lively curiosity concerning the Gazelle, and expressed a wish to go on board and inspect her.

When this desire manifested itself plainly, as it was natural that it should, Sandycraw was ready to meet it.

"Of course you can go on board," said he, "and I will be glad to show you the boat; but not all of you at once, as there are enough of you to sink her. I will take a few at a time, and they can see what there is to be seen, while the others wait."

This arrangement was reasonably satisfactory to the Hitchley family, who were escorted to the Gazelle in squads, and the boat was duly shown to them, though it was quite a trial to the exhibitors to answer all the questions that were showered upon them.

The visitors generally behaved well; but it was noticed that the old man and one or two others displayed a curiosity that was rather too intense and too hard to satisfy.

They insisted upon examining, or at least looking into every closet, drawer or other receptacle that might possibly contain money or valuables,

even going so far as to turn over the pillows and feel under the mattresses in the berths.

Though they found nothing, as care had been taken that there should be nothing for them to find, this disposition of theirs made Sandycraw uneasy, and he again doubted the wisdom of his course in coming to Spoon Lake.

Wishing to conciliate them, he took them, still in squads, on excursions around the lake, using wood as fuel for this purpose, as an emergency might arise that would make his coal very valuable to him.

These excursions were necessarily short; but they appeared to give pleasure to most of the Hitchley family, especially to the younger members, and perhaps they kept the minds of others from dwelling on thoughts that might tend to worry the owner of the Gazelle.

That gentleman had suddenly become unusually circumspect.

It was to be feared that his caution, if not greater than the circumstances required, might be carried so far as to do him more harm than good.

Distrust begets distrust, and a person who feels that he is suspected may be tempted to give cause for the suspicion.

Crawley did not offer his visitors any of the wines or even the liquors on the Gazelle, as he thought that they would be less likely to do mischief if they were not inflamed by drink.

He would not accept an offer for himself and his companions to dine or sup at the Hitchley mansion, not only because he knew that the viands would not suit him, but because he was unwilling to leave the Gazelle unguarded.

He would not extend a similar invitation to the Hitchleys, because he feared that they might take advantage of him and overpower his people, as there were enough of them to do that if they should get a fair chance.

The plunder that had been so easily acquired had already become a source of danger and an object of continual care.

Thus there soon arose a coolness between the squatters and the new arrivals, which was more likely to be increased than to be diminished.

This was not a bit agreeable to Mr. Alexander Crawley; but it seemed to him to be best to err on the safe side, which he considered the side of caution.

He was there to await the arrival of Ben Somes and Jim Hanley, who had been directed to report to him at that place, and when they came he would feel strong enough to fear nobody.

Besides, he believed himself to be entirely safe in Spoon Lake from any possible (though improbable) pursuit, and he had intended to remain there a while, and he was not a man who could be easily made to change his intentions.

While the Gazelle was there she must be guarded, and he meant to watch and guard her.

So when night came he made an excuse about the machinery and the condition of the boat's bottom, which had not the least foundation in fact, and dropped the Gazelle out into the lake and anchored her there.

It is likely that he exaggerated the danger and just as likely that by exaggerating he increased it.

Anyhow, the Hitchleys did not like that sort of thing, and on the second day the coolness between the two parties was more apparent than on the first day.

Yet, when Sandycraw expressed a desire to have a hunt with the Hitchley "boys," and a willingness to purchase any deer that might be brought in, they were ready enough to accommodate him, and a hunting party was at once made up.

As Crawley was the only one who left the boat, and as the rest of the hunting party consisted of two of the young Hitchleys and Joe Dillinger, it was reasonable to suppose that the Gazelle would be safe during his absence.

He carried a Shar 's rifle, which excited the curiosity of the two Hitchleys and Joe Dillinger, and they examined it carefully, asking many questions about it.

Indeed, it may safely be said that no Down-East Yankee could surpass those squatters in inquisitiveness.

Their expressed opinion was that the new-fangled weapon "wasn't much good," and they were firm in the belief that it would never kill a deer as quick as their rifles would, no matter how many times it might shoot without loading.

Yet it was evident that they respected the formidable tool, and were more or less afraid of it as an argument between man and man.

The hunt did not promise to be successful, and it was admitted that daylight deer-hunts in that vicinity seldom were successful.

So it was agreed that the party should separate and spread out, with the view of covering a larger extent of country.

Thus it happened that toward the middle of the afternoon Sandycraw, who had not noted his bearings and kept the run of distance and direction as well as he should have done, discovered that he had lost his way.

That was not the worst of the case, as he was so completely turned about and bewildered that he could not even guess at the course he ought to take to get back to Spoon Lake.

He had, in fact, been thinking entirely of his personal affairs, to the utter neglect of his present situation and surroundings.

He shouted to his companions, but all in vain, and the firing of his rifle was equally in vain.

There arose a serious doubt in his mind as to whether they had not purposely allowed him to lose himself in that wilderness.

If they had not started back to Spoon Lake as soon as they had separated from him, they must surely be near enough to hear his shots, which they would answer if they meant well toward him.

It would be far beyond the limits of a joke if they had led him on with the intention of betraying him, leaving him to find his way out of the woods as well as he could, while they went back home to make an easy prey of his comrades and the Gazelle, including the plunder of the New Madrid bank.

The more he thought of this possibility, the more his suspicion was aroused, until he was half-crazed by his desire to return to Spoon Lake; but the more intense this desire became, the less chance he saw of gratifying it.

He wandered on blindly, tiring himself out to no purpose, until he struck a path which, though scarcely more than a mere trail, suggested the hope of finding a human habitation.

Following it eagerly and rapidly, he came to a little clearing in which stood a small log-cabin of the rudest description.

There was no sign of cultivation or occupancy about it, and his heart sunk within him as he perceived that it was apparently deserted.

On a closer approach, he saw a slight wreath of smoke arising from the stick-and-clay chimney.

Holding his rifle in readiness for possible hostility, he advanced and "hailed the house," according to the custom of the backwoods country.

It was not until after his third hail that the door opened, and in the doorway stood a woman.

The sight of that woman almost petrified Sandycraw, and well it might.

She was tall and gaunt, with a complexion as dark as that of a mulatto, withered and wrinkled skin, and piercing black eyes.

In short, she was no other than the Creole fortune-teller of St. Louis, who was known as Madame Lavalette, and whom Sandycraw had called "mother."

He would sooner have expected the earth to open and swallow him than to meet her at that time and place.

The surprise was all on his part, as she appeared to take the meeting quite as a matter of course.

How in the name of wonder did she get there, and why had she come there?

"So it is you, Sandy," she remarked. "I thought I knew your voice. You seem to be getting fond of coming to visit the old woman."

"Coming to visit you?" he exclaimed. "I never thought of such a thing. I would as soon have looked for the sun to fall as to see you here. I can scarcely believe my eyes."

"Don't believe them, then. Nobody asks you to."

"Where did you come from?"

"St. Louis. That is where I belong."

"How did you get here?"

"I flew, of course. You don't suppose I walked."

"You are more of a witch than I had believed you to be. What are you doing here?"

"Standing in the door and talking to you," calmly answered the old woman.

"You know what I mean. What did you come here for?"

"Oh, I just dropped down this way to see some of my children, or my people, or whatever you may care to call them."

"Niggers? Voodoo folks?"

"Perhaps. Don't be too inquisitive about me and my ways. Have you run across anything that looks like a rope yet, Sandy? You seem to be getting on pretty well so far. If you will step into the house, I will tell you some more of your fortune."

"I don't want to know any more of it," almost shrieked Sandycraw. "I am getting afraid of witchcraft, anyhow."

"There's worse things than that for you to be afraid of."

"But there is one thing you may do for me, if you can, and if you will."

"It is more than likely that I can, and I suppose I will. What is it?"

"I have been hunting, and have got lost in these infernal woods. As you know so much, perhaps you can tell me the shortest and best way to reach Spoon Lake."

"That is easy enough," answered the old woman. "I suppose you see the sun, as it is shining plainly through the trees."

"Yes, I see the sun."

"And you see how I am pointing now?"

"Yes."

"That is your way. Take that course, keeping the sun right at your back, and inside of two hours you will strike Spoon Lake."

"Thank you," said Sandycraw, rather ungraciously, and he turned abruptly and started

off on the course which the old woman had indicated.

He did not feel very thankful, as he was by no means sure that she had directed him rightly, and he fairly hated her because of her presence there.

It looked as if she had followed him and meant to stick to his trail.

"I don't like this a bit," he muttered, as he strode away from the cabin. "It looks like the worst of bad luck. Was that little row in East St. Louis the trouble I was warned against? I would never have thought that I would go out hunting this day and find a panther in the path."

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE POWER OF RAW WHISKY.

SANDYCRAW was worried as he went along by thoughts of the fortune teller, whose presence in that cabin was not only incomprehensible to him, but seemed to be fraught with danger.

Why had she come there, and how had she got there?

If he had just then been capable of calm reflection, it might have occurred to him that the railroad from St. Louis did not run very far back of Spoon Lake, and that she could easily have made the trip to that place before he got there with the Gazelle.

But, even then, how could she have known or guessed that he was heading for that region, and what had prompted her to be there to meet him?

Was it merely a chance, after all?

If so, it was a chance that he utterly detested.

Had she really spoken the truth when she said that she had "dropped down" there on what might be called professional business?

Confound her witchcraft ways, anyhow!

One thing was pretty certain, and that was that she was pretty well acquainted with the locality, and he had "given himself away" to her, though under a sort of compulsion, when he asked her to direct him to Spoon Lake.

If her direction should prove to be correct, she would know where to find him, and could easily reach him, whether she meant good or ill to him.

But, though she might dislike him intensely, or even hate him, she was still his mother, and it was hard to believe that she could really seek to harm him.

He did not allow these thoughts, troublesome as they were, to take his mind from the important business of the moment, his return to Spoon Lake.

That point he was exceedingly anxious to reach as soon as possible, for the reason that has been noted, and accordingly he pressed forward as rapidly as he could, but at the same time carefully, keeping his back to the sun, and following to the best of his ability the course that had been pointed out to him.

Considerably to his surprise, but vastly more to his delight, within the time that Madame Lavalette had named he came within sight of Spoon Lake and the Hitchley habitation and the Gazelle.

The day was then nearly done, and Hiram Hitchley wondered at seeing Crawley return alone, as the three young men had not yet come in.

This latter fact was also a cause of wonder to Sandycraw, but yet more a cause of congratulation, as it was then evident to him that no such plot as he had suspected had been put in operation against him.

It was not yet dark when Joe Dillenger and the two Hitchley boys arrived, bringing a fine buck as the result of the day's endeavors.

They were surprised at finding Crawley there, and wanted to know what had become of him, declaring that they would have been home long ago if they had not spent their time in searching for him.

"I got lost," exclaimed Sandycraw. "You might have known that I would get lost in those woods."

"Yes, we mought ha' known it ef we'd thort," asserted Ben Hitchley; "but I reckon we warn't thinkin'."

"You can't have been far from me, though, when I began to call you. Didn't you hear me yell?"

"Nary yell!"

"I fired off my rifle two or three times, and you must have heard that."

"We heerd a gun, and allowed it mought be yourn, but reckoned that you'd run across a deer or suthin."

This was all reasonable enough, and Crawley was obliged to admit that it was satisfactory; but he was careful not to explain how he had found his way back to Spoon Lake.

He purchased the carcass of the deer, and sent two of his deck hands to bring it aboard the Gazelle, glad to believe that his fears were not justified, and that he had not been the subject of such a plot as he had suspected.

This belief was quite correct; but he did not know the whole truth.

The young men had not plotted against him, and had not thought of such a thing; but there had been a plot all the same—a plot that was destined to give Mr. Alexander Crawley a great

deal of trouble, and to cause an entire change of his plans.

The plotter was cunning old Hiram Hitchley.

That sagacious squatter, more than suspecting that there was a pile of money or other valuable property concealed on the Gazelle, set his wits to work to discover ways and means to find out its whereabouts, and concocted a plan which he began to put in operation shortly after Crawley and the other hunters had got out of sight.

Naturally presuming, from the fact that he had not been invited to take a drink on the Gazelle, that the boat was destitute of liquors, he approached Berry Sanders and condoled with him upon that grievous lack of spiritual consolation.

It happened that the old man's presumption was reasonably correct just then, as there was no liquor on the Gazelle that could be got at.

Crawley always locked up everything of the kind when he left the boat, and kept the key in his pocket, not only with the view of saving his stores, but to prevent his passenger and crew from becoming drunk and incapable in case of an emergency.

Berry Sanders was the man against whom this rule was specially enforced, as he was the most important person in the expedition next to the chief, and as he was noted for his thirst, being in the habit of consuming liquor recklessly whenever he could get hold of it.

He did not resent the restrictions that were placed upon him, but they grieved him, and he was in a condition to respond warmly to the condolence of Hiram Hitchley, lamenting bitterly the absence of anything to drink that was stronger than water.

"I kin straighten you up thar, my friend," said the old man, "and I'll be glad to do it, too, because you're a good kind of a feller, and not nigh so uppish and offish as Sandy Crawley has got to be."

"I never saw such a change in anybody as has come over that man lately," observed Sanders.

"He don't treat his old friends right, and that's a fact. Well, Mr. Sanders, ef you'll come along o' me, I'll take you to whar I've got a jug o' whisky hid out in the woods, to keep it away from the boys and girls. It's the ginivine article, too, the pure juice o' the cawn, 'stilled not more'n ten mile from hyar, on the quiet. It'll jest warm you all over and put new life into you."

Berry Sanders, who was anxious to be warmed all over, and have new life put into him, gladly accompanied the old man to the place in the woods where the whisky was to be found, not knowing that it had been carried and concealed there for his special benefit.

The whisky was, as Hiram Hitchley had represented it, calculated to warm him all over and put new life into him.

As a matter of fact, it scarcely differed from raw spirits, being new whisky, which had never felt the mollifying touch of the rectifier, and was consequently fiery and drunk-provoking to the last degree.

Though it contained none of the poisonous ingredients that might have been supplied to it in its passage to the regular market, its newness and rawness made it a very dangerous beverage to fool with.

That sort of thing, however, happened to be just what Berry Sanders wanted, and he fooled with the potent beverage until it promised very shortly to make the biggest kind of a fool of him, and it easily succeeded in doing so.

The intoxicating fluid darted into his veins, and started a conflagration in his blood that mounted to his brain, drove out his wits, and set his tongue at work like a flutter-wheel.

As this was exactly the state of affairs which Hiram Hitchley desired to produce, he encouraged his companion to drink and talk.

The old man was not only seasoned to raw whisky, but, while plying Sanders freely with the fiery liquor, he himself touched it very lightly, thus keeping his head reasonably clear, and manipulating his scheme to suit himself.

Thus it was that the St. Louis tough, overjoyed at having got hold of a fluid that made drunk come quickly, sunk his discretion in the depths of his appetite, and was easily persuaded to make disclosures at which in his sober moments he would not even have hinted.

Led on by cunning old Hiram Hitchley, he became boastful, bragging loudly of his exploits, and finally brought his career down to the successful raid upon the New Madrid bank.

Upon this, as the latest and greatest event of his life, he enlarged extensively, stimulated in his talk by the jug inducements held out by the old man.

He not only told the entire story of the bank robbery, but exaggerated the amount of the plunder, informing his liberal host that it was then safely stowed away in the Gazelle, and that Crawley and he were only awaiting the arrival of their two partners to divide the swag.

This was just what Hiram Hitchley wanted to know, and it was all he wanted to know.

Satisfied with having got enough of a good thing, he upset the jug as if by accident, spilling the remainder of its contents, greatly to the grief of his companion, whom he persuaded

to return to the Gazelle before he became too drunk to travel.

Berry Sanders managed to get aboard the boat, was helped up to the cabin by one of the colored deck hands, and was bundled into his berth, where he lay like a log in a drunken stupor, utterly oblivious of anything that had happened during the day.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE PLOT FOILED.

SUCH was the state of affairs that confronted Sandycraw on his return from that unpleasant hunting expedition, and he was soon made aware of the nature and extent of the difficulty.

Somewhat surprised at seeing nothing of Berry Sanders at the Hitchley habitation or on the shore of the lake, he looked for his partner as soon as he went aboard the Gazelle, but saw nothing of him there.

When he inquired for him, the disgraceful and dangerous truth was disclosed that Berry Sanders was dead-drunk in his berth.

He was still dead drunk, and the utmost efforts of Sandycraw could not arouse him sufficiently to get any coherent speech out of him.

Half wild with rage, and full of fear as well as of wonder, Crawley hastened to inquire how this sad condition of things had been brought about, and the man who had helped Sanders up into the cabin told him enough to excite his liveliest apprehensions and make him nervously anxious to know more.

How had the man got his liquor?

The store-room on the boat was still locked, and when it was opened it was clear that nothing there had been touched.

Information from the deck hand was to the effect that Berry had gone off with old man Hitchley, had stayed away a long time, and was fearfully and wonderfully drunk when he got back.

That was enough to make Mr. Alexander Crawley fear the worst.

He was almost certain that Hiram Hitchley had taken his partner off and made him drunk, and he well knew how very drunk Berry would get when he had the chance, and how tonguey he became when he was drunk.

The odds were that he had made a fool of himself in his usual style, and had "given the snap away."

As for getting any information from the victim of this detestable plot, that was out of the question, as raw whisky held him in almost a deathlike grip.

So Sandycraw, dreading the consequences of his partner's stupid and perilous performance, hurried below and to the forward part of the boat, to see whether any suspicious circumstances on shore required his attention.

He found them right at hand, ready made, but not to order or to his liking.

The Gazelle lay with her nose at the bank, a small line out, and a gang-plank leading to the shore.

Night had settled upon Spoon Lake and its environs; but the moon was shining in a clear sky, and there was plenty of light to allow the owner of the Gazelle to see what was going on.

What he saw was Hiram Hitchley, his three sons, Joe Dillenger and the old woman, approaching the boat from the direction of their cabin, not stealthily, but without making the least unnecessary noise.

They all carried rifles, including Mrs. Hitchley, and their appearance was decidedly formidable and menacing.

When Crawley discovered them, they had got so near to the boat that it was not possible to make any attempt to escape, or to prepare to give them a hostile reception.

Though at his wits' end, he yet perceived that his only chance was to start a parley with them, and try to hold them off until he could hit upon some plan to defeat their probable purpose.

Therefore he hailed them in friendly tones, though he was boiling over with rage, and was at the same time consumed with apprehension of a peril which he was not prepared to confront.

"Hello, Uncle Hiram! What's up? Here you are with all the fighting portion of the family. You folks look as if you were going to war. What's the matter? Has the guyascutis broke loose?"

"Thar ain't no more uncle hyar, Sandy Crawley," sternly answered the old man. "Thar hain't nothin' broke loose, and you cain't uncle us out o' what we've got onto."

"I don't understand you. What do you mean by that kind of talk?"

Hiram Hitchley had been compelled to wait until he could acquaint the returned hunters with his plot and his grand discovery, and then he had started the family out to capture the Gazelle and the treasure.

Why should they not?

As they were monarchs of all they surveyed at Spoon Lake, and there was nobody to take any notice of their proceedings, they could do as they pleased with the Gazelle or any other victim that came within their reach.

Besides, if it was not lawful to rob robbers, Hiram Hitchley believed that it ought to be made lawful.

So his answer to Crawley came as sharp as shooting.

"We mean business, Sandy Crawley. We want the money that you've got salted away on the little boat thar, or a good sheer of it."

"What money?" faintly inquired Sandycraw.

"The money that you've stole from the bank up the river. I've found out all about it, and I know jest how much it is, and we want it, and we mean to have it."

The trouble was clear enough then, and there could no longer be any doubt that drunken Berry Sanders had told all he knew.

It was a bad scrape, and what chance was there to get out of it?

Sandycraw thought he saw an opening, and was of the opinion that his only chance just then was to continue to temporize as he had begun.

His pilot and engineer, hearing the talk, had started forward to see what was going on; but he sent them back by a motion of his hand behind him.

Then he addressed the Hitchleys in as friendly a tone as before, in spite of his wrath and worry.

"That sounds like a joke, Uncle Hiram, but I doubt if you mean it that way."

"You jest bet I don't. Thar ain't no joke about it. You've got that money, and we want it and mean to have it."

"Do you want it all?"

"No. We ain't hogs. Give us half, and we'll let you off."

"Well, Uncle Hiram, that don't bother me near as much as you might think it would. Easy come, and easy go, has been my style for this long time, an' a few thousand dollars more or less don't matter the worth of a pin to me. As you have got me in a sort of a hole, I am willing to share that money with you on your own terms."

"Is that a real fact, Sandy?"

"The factest kind of a fact. Make a light out there, Uncle Hiram, and I will go and get the stuff and bring it to you, and then we will have a square divide."

That this proposition should be even silently assented to, was beyond Sandy Crawley's comprehension; but it had already been a matter of wonder to him that the Hitchleys, having the power in their hands, had not at once rushed on board of the Gazelle and taken possession of her and seized the treasure.

The plain truth was that his tongue had been too much for them, and he accepted the fact gratefully.

"Hello!" he cried, as he turned from them, and the exclamation was caused by an apparently accidental stumble and fall.

He had stumbled purposely, however, and as he dropped on the deck, he quickly cut with his sharp knife the shore-line over which he had tripped.

His maneuver was of course unperceived by the Hitchleys, and, as he arose and ran back, the Gazelle slowly and almost imperceptibly began to edge away from the shore.

He hastened to the engine-room—that is to say, to the open space where the engine was located, and a sharp order to the engineer was sufficient for his purpose.

That official, who had gained a pretty good idea of what was going on, was standing at his post, with plenty of steam up, ready for instant action.

"Back her!" cried Sandycraw. "Back her for all she is worth!"

Immediately the steam rushed out of the little exhaust-pipes, the wheels revolved rapidly, and the Gazelle slid away from the shore, leaving the Hitchley family staring in stupid astonishment.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A NAVAL ENGAGEMENT.

NOTHING could be more evident than the fact that the Hitchleys had not expected any such development, and their wrath was great when they saw how they had been tricked.

As soon as he had given his order to the engineer, Sandycraw hurried up to the cabin and got his rifle.

From the forward part of the cabin-deck he hailed his discomfited enemies, lately supposed to be his friends.

"Good-by, Uncle Hiram! I can't divide that money with you this evening. Some other evening. Sorry to disappoint you!"

The answer was a shot from the old man's rifle; but Sandycraw had taken the precaution to have a shelter at hand, and he dodged behind it as soon as the weapon was raised.

The Gazelle quietly backed away to the middle of the lake, at what might be called a respectful distance from the shore, but not entirely out of rifle-shot, and there her anchor was dropped.

It was all that could be done, and there she must remain and await such developments as might be forthcoming.

The difficulty with the Hitchleys had disarranged Sandycraw's plans, as well as placed him in a position of immediate peril; but it need not upset him entirely.

He had come there mainly to wait for Ben Somes and Jim Hanley, whom he was expecting daily and almost hourly.

If they should come there and find him absent, they would naturally conclude that he was false to his promises, and he would not know how to communicate with them, so as to inform them of the cause of his departure and appoint another rendezvous.

Had he known that Jim Hanley was there locked in the New Madrid jail, he might have been easier in his mind concerning those two, as he could get at Ben Somes without much difficulty.

As no newspapers ever reached Spoon Lake, he knew nothing of what had happened at New Madrid since he left there, and he deemed it necessary to wait for his partners, who ought to be coming along soon.

Another important point was the fact that the Gazelle could not be run down the creek in the night time.

As she must stay in the lake until daylight at all events, it was quite likely that she might be able to stay there longer, if there should be no serious difficulty during the night.

Against such an event it was Crawley's first duty to guard, after the Gazelle was anchored, and he proceeded to do so by organizing his men into watches and seeing that they were properly armed and supplied with ammunition.

Berry Sanders was not counted in either of the watches, being still sunk in a drunken stupor, from which his chief proposed to arouse him if possible.

So he was carried down to the forward part of the boiler-deck, where, after being rolled and rubbed and pounded pretty severely, he was thoroughly drenched with buckets of water from the lake, which were poured and dashed upon him vigorously.

This rough treatment aroused him from his stupor, though it did not bring him to his senses, as he seemed to be quite unable to comprehend what had happened or what was being done to him.

As Crawley wanted to squeeze the truth out of the man, as well as to make him available for use in the event of further difficulty, he sought to awaken his slumbering intellect by administering a stiff horn of his own liquor.

This had the desired effect, and the squeezing process was begun.

"What have you been doing?" demanded Crawley. "Where did you go with old man Hitchley, and what did he do to you, and what have you been telling him?"

The old man's victim feebly denied that anything of the kind had occurred.

"You may as well own up," persisted Sandycraw. "I know that you went off with him and came back drunk, and he has told me that you gave our whole snap away."

Sanders admitted that Hiram Hitchley had invited him to go out into the woods and take a drink, and he had gone, and he supposed he must have taken the drink; but he remembered nothing of that or any subsequent proceedings.

The old man's raw whisky had thrown him for the time into a state of complete mental oblivion.

"I should suppose that you must have taken fifty drinks," declared the chief, "as I never saw a worse used-up man, and I know that you told that old wretch all about the New Madrid business and the money on the boat. Then he and his tribe came down to the Gazelle in a bunch to rob us. I stood them off with soft talk, and we slipped away from them; but they are onto us, and the trouble hasn't begun to be over yet."

When this disastrous business was fully explained to Berry Sanders, and he saw it in the light of another horn of Crawley's whisky, he was amazed, bewildered and deeply repentant.

He expressed a desire to do anything in his power to atone for his misconduct, and, as his services were sorely needed, he was assigned to duty as soon as he could get about.

"There's no use crying over spilt milk," observed Crawley, "and we must do the best we can under the circumstances. If Jim Hanley and Ben Somes were here, we could sail in and beat off those dirty scamps; but just now we must keep out of their way, and I only hope that we won't have to fight them off."

It did not seem likely that the affair would be brought to such an extremity.

As far as Crawley and his friends knew, the extent of the navy possessed by the Hitchley tribe was one dug-out which they used for fishing purposes, and it was badly water-logged and incapable of carrying more than three people conveniently.

Therefore the Gazelle might be supposed to be reasonably safe as long as she kept at a sufficient distance from the shore of the lake and maintained a good watch.

Even in the event of an attack, as steam was kept up, she could elude her enemies or put them at a disadvantage.

It was clear that the Hitchleys, who at one time might have got possession of the boat with comparatively little difficulty or danger, would find such an undertaking too much for them in her present position.

Before long, however, suspicious noises on the shore indicated that they had not abandoned their intention of trying to get hold of that money.

The suspicious noises were the blows of axes, accompanied by the falling of trees, and men could be indistinctly seen moving about on the shore.

Though Crawley had a good glass, it did not plainly disclose what was going on, and it was surmised, rather than known, that the men were working on something near the water's edge or in the water.

What they were doing was the question that interested those on the Gazelle.

Crawley's guess was that they were making a raft, and this was such a reasonable suggestion that it was generally adopted.

Berry Sanders offered to swim off in that direction and find out what was going on.

"I am afraid that it might be dangerous for you to mix so much water with your whisky," objected Sandycraw, "and we can't afford to lose you since you have got reasonably sober."

But Berry was so anxious to do something to atone for his shameful fault, and begged so hard for a chance, representing himself as one of the best swimmers, that his chief finally consented that he should make the effort.

The anchor was pulled up, and the Gazelle slowly and quietly steamed a little nearer to the spot where the Hitchleys were at work.

Then the anchor was dropped, and Berry Sanders, who had stripped for the purpose, dropped over the side and swam away, after being cautioned not to go ashore, lest he should stir up a water moccasin in the marsh.

He was gone nearly an hour, and his friends were beginning to fear that he was drowned, or had fallen into the hands of the enemy, when he bobbed up serenely at the side of the boat, and was hauled on board.

His report confirmed Sandycraw's guess.

The Hitchley tribe were building a raft; indeed they had already built one, and appeared to be erecting a fortification upon the logs of which it was composed.

Though there were so many Hitchleys, and though they were acknowledged to be good and rapid workmen with their axes when they chose to work, yet this job seemed to those on the Gazelle, as well as to Berry Sanders, to have been done with marvelous speed.

The fact was that the squatters had for a long time possessed a raft, which they had found to be a very convenient arrangement for catching fish, and on this occasion they only needed to construct the fortification, and the real wonder was that they had thought of doing any such thing, considering the extreme stupidity with which they had opened their game.

Crawley saw nothing to be afraid of when Berry Sanders had made his report.

At the best the raft would be an unmanageable affair, and it might be supposed that the fortification would be merely a barricade at one end, which the Gazelle being easily controlled, could flank or get in the rear of as she chose.

The Hitchleys, however, were a little smarter than Sandycraw took them to be.

Their fortification was built in the middle of the raft, and formed three sides of a square, each side being composed of two logs, one pinned on top of the other, and the six rudely dovetailed together after the manner of log-house work.

It was a small affair, but big enough for the five men of the Hitchley tribe to get inside of and use their rifles.

Such as it was, it was watched closely from the Gazelle, and the watchers soon perceived that it was moving toward them.

If the men on the boat had supposed that the Hitchleys were going to stand up and pole the raft, thus presenting fair marks for rifle-shots, they were mistaken.

If the Hitchleys supposed that they were going to catch the men on the boat napping and make an easy prey of them, they were also mistaken.

The raft was propelled and guided by swimmers, whose rifles were within the fortification, and Sandycraw and his friends were wide awake and ready for any emergency.

As the log battery slowly bore down upon the Gazelle, Crawley inspected it closely, and soon discovered its nature and possibilities.

"Those scalawags mean business," said he; "but I think we can easily spoil their game by flanking their position."

The anchor was raised, the wheels revolved, and the Gazelle began to move forward, slowly at first, and then more rapidly.

When the Hitchleys saw this move, they must have suspected its purpose, or believed that the boat was trying to get away from them, as the two men in the fortification were joined by two of the swimmers, and those four, picking up their rifles, at once opened fire on the Gazelle.

In the little battle that ensued there were advantages and disadvantages on both sides.

The men on the raft were only partially protected by their little breastwork, being exposed to a fire from the upper works of the Gazelle; but the men on the boat could not fire down

upon them without exposing themselves yet more plainly.

The weapons on the boat were repeaters or breech-loaders, giving the Gazelle the advantage of more frequent and rapid fire; but the hunting-rifles on the raft were in the hands of men who were expert in their use, and whose aim was accurate and deadly.

On the whole, the only real advantage possessed by the Gazelle lay in her ability to move about at her pleasure and select the position from which she would fight, or perhaps evade a fight altogether.

In selecting a position, however, occurred her greatest danger and difficulty.

Crawley wished to steam around the raft so as to expose the undefended side of the fortification, and as soon as the boat began to move, he ordered his men to keep well sheltered, and on no account to expose their persons to the fire of the enemy, no matter how anxious they might be to take part in the engagement.

These orders were not implicitly obeyed by some who wanted to get a shot at the Hitchleys, and there was one man who could not shelter himself, and that was the pilot.

Being unused to bullets and unable to defend himself or retaliate, he neglected his duty for the occupation of dodging, and soon cried out that he was hit and could steer no more.

Sandycraw rushed into the little pilot-house and seized the wheel, and, as he was no slouch of a pilot, he got the Gazelle under control at once.

Bullets saluted him, too; but the Hitchleys, being obliged to reload, could fire but slowly, and in the mean time the boat was rapidly getting away from the danger point and into the position she wanted.

In a few minutes she had reached it, the open end of the raft fortification being exposed, and the music began on board of the Gazelle.

Sandycraw rung for the engine to stop, seized his rifle, and hastened to take part in the action.

"The colored troops fought nobly," as usual, with the rest, and there was poured upon the raft an incessant stream of fire, which would have been murderous if it had been better aimed.

As it was, it was at least terrifying, and the result of this sudden attack in the rear was the immediate dispersion of the Hitchley tribe.

Helter-skelter they jumped overboard, not neglecting to take their rifles, and swam toward the shore, separating as widely as possible, and leaving one of their number dead behind them.

Without attempting to injure or annoy them in their flight, the Gazelle steamed up to the raft, made fast to it, and it was then discovered that the man who had been surely killed was one of the young Hitchleys.

His body was unceremoniously dumped overboard, and preparations were made for burning the raft as far as it could be burned.

Shovelfuls of live coals were taken from the furnace and dropped inside of the fortification, firewood being piled on the glowing mass, and soon the raft furnished quite a lively conflagration, lighting up the placid lake and the surrounding forest.

Though the raft might not be destroyed, it would surely never again be available for aggressive or any other purposes.

The Gazelle was brought to anchor at a safe distance from the burning mass, and an inspection of the fighting force revealed the fact that the only injured man was the pilot, who had been shot through the right arm, and whose wound was easy to manage.

"Those scalawags showed more sense than I gave them credit for," remarked Sandycraw; "but I don't believe that they have sense enough to do the one thing that might worry us into making terms with them."

"What is that?" inquired Berry Sanders.

"Their best scheme would have been to block up the creek, so that we would be unable to get away from here with the Gazelle."

"They may do it yet."

"I don't believe that they will think of it—anyhow, they will be in no hurry to do it—and we will get away from here at daylight, as we can't afford to wait any longer for Somes and Hanley."

CHAPTER XXVII.

SUCCESSFUL PURSUIT.

On board of the Mountaineer after she left New Madrid there was by no means as jolly a time as there was on the Gazelle.

Though the mountaineers were in reasonably good spirits, and had cause to be satisfied with themselves generally, they were not as much disposed to hilarity as the Gazelles were, nor as much given to the consumption of drink and to gambling with each other.

They had a fair allowance of wines and liquors and cigars, with an abundance of provisions and boat stores, as Dan Thedford, under the instructions of Colonel Tazewell, had catered almost lavishly for the expedition; but they were not inclined to indulge in any kind of dissipation.

So they passed the time pleasantly, enjoying the ease and independence of that style of travel,

but at the same time attending strictly to the duties of their guest.

They did not anticipate any serious resistance by the robbers, as they had learned from Jack Jones the exact number of men on the Gazelle, and could form a fair judgment of what they might expect.

Crawley and his partner would of course resist capture to the utmost extent of their ability; but it was doubtful whether the other white men on the boat would fight for them, and the colored deck hands were of course presumed to be non-combatants.

It was generally acknowledged that the real difficulty lay in finding the craft which they were seeking—not in cooking the hare, but in catching it—and their best hope was found in the fact that the men on the Gazelle would not guess at the style of pursuit that was being made, even if they should suspect any pursuit.

Of course the utmost vigilance prevailed, and everybody connected with the expedition was continually on the lookout for a sign or trace of the Gazelle.

It was quite certain that she had not come back by New Madrid since she was reported as having gone down-stream, and it was certain that she could not appear in the river, at least in the daytime, without being seen by the Mountaineers.

Upward bound boats were hailed to make inquiries of her, and landings were visited to get news of her.

Thus she was heard from several times, as it was impossible that a craft of her description could be seen on the river without attracting special attention.

Necessarily the progress of the Mountaineer was slow under these circumstances, and when night came she made scarcely any progress at all.

Though she did not tie up, but kept near the middle of the river, she stood there like a sentry, backing the wheel that hung at her stern, and dropping down very slowly and cautiously.

Nothing could pass her then without being seen, and no upward bound boat came along without being hailed for news of the Gazelle.

All the information that was received concerning her was to the effect that she had been seen going down the river, and it was almost certain that she had not made a landing anywhere.

Thus it seemed to be more than likely that she had gone right on down to New Orleans, or at least a long distance in that direction, and the danger was that she might run up some tributary of the Mississippi, or into some creek or bayou, thus escaping the observation of her pursuers.

This danger which would increase as the journey lengthened, could be guarded against only by the utmost vigilance, and by making continual inquiries at landings and of passing boats.

Even then the little craft might slip away, if that should be her intention, without being perceived by any person.

As soon as day broke the Mountaineer started down the river again at her usual rate of speed, the pursuers fully expecting that their search would be a long and tedious one.

The sun was not yet an hour high when they saw a sight which told them that their journey was at an end; that they need seek no further, and that immediate action must take the place of constant vigilance.

What they saw was the Gazelle herself, steaming slowly up the river near the Arkansas shore.

"There she is! There is the Gazelle!" cried Dan Thedford, and the Mountaineer was at once all bustle and excitement.

The little craft had made her way from Spoon Lake down the creek and out into the Mississippi, the assistant pilot steering under the direction of his wounded chief, and Sandy Crawley acting as captain and mate.

She had got out with little trouble, considering the narrowness and shallowness of the stream, and then the question was, what should she do, and where should she go to?

Sandycraw was both sorry and angry at being obliged to desert the comrades whom he was expecting at Spoon Lake; but there was no help, for it would have been very unwise to remain longer in the immediate vicinity of the hostile Hitchleys.

He had already thought the matter over, and had come to the conclusion that he would go back on his track, and run the Gazelle into the Ohio.

Then he could go up the Tennessee or the Cumberland, or might go on to Louisville or Cincinnati.

Being only a rover, free as air, and with no incumbrances, there seemed to be nothing to hinder the Gazelle from going where she pleased.

As there was no reason to suspect any pursuit, especially a pursuit by steamboat, the appearance of the Mountaineer in the river did not excite any disquietude among Crawley and his companions.

She appeared to them to be only an ordinary stern-wheel boat of small caliber, with whose

business and intentions they could not possibly have anything to do.

The strange and suspicious performance of the Mountaineer, however, soon excited their curiosity and aroused their apprehensions.

When she came near the Gazelle, she turned, or changed her course "quartering" the channel, and aiming at the little boat as if she meant to strike and sink her.

She could easily force a collision just then, as she was coming down-stream while the Gazelle was going up, and she therefore carried with her all the advantage of the swift current of the Mississippi.

Sandycraw, who was on his hurricane deck, waved his hat and shouted to those on the Mountaineer.

"What are you doing? Are you crazy? Do you want to run us down?"

There was no answer, and he directed his pilot to change the course of the Gazelle so as to avoid a collision.

At the same time the mysterious and apparently beligerent stern-wheel boat altered her course, and continued to bear down on the Gazelle.

Several men were visible on her decks; but Colonel Tazewell and Clifford Darrell and Jack Jones were not among them, as it had been thought best that those whom Sandycraw would be likely to recognize should be kept out of his sight for the present.

By this time the commander of the Gazelle was thoroughly worried and full of wrath, and he began to swing his arms and utter his protests.

"Keep off, I say, or you will get hurt! What do you mean by this? What are you after?"

"We are after you," shouted a tall man on the Mountaineer, who was no other than Sheriff Heilman.

"We are after you, you scoundrels! I've got a warrant for your arrest for the robbery of the bank in New Madrid."

This was a terrible blow to Sandy Crawley—terrible because of its unexpectedness.

He could no more have expected such a thing than he could have looked for the heavens to fall.

So he had been suspected, more than suspected, had been found out, and had been pursued in a manner that indicated the intention of the Missouri authorities to fasten the grip of the law on him firmly.

What, then, had become of Jack Jones, and how had his plan, so skillfully prepared and carefully carried out, met such an utter and ignominious failure?

The blow staggered him for a moment, because he was so completely bewildered; but there was no thought of fear in his heart, and his notorious grit quickly came to his rescue and pulled him up to his work.

"That is a likely lie!" he shouted back. "I believe that you are nothing but a gang of river pirates. Keep away from here, or I will shoot your pilot!"

"That is a game that we can play, too," answered Tom Heilman. "We have come to take you, and you will find out before you are through with us that the easiest way is the best way."

The Mountaineer no longer seemed to wish to run down the Gazelle, but acted as if her object was to range alongside of the smaller boat and give the criminals a chance to surrender.

"You had better give in," yelled Amos Hard-ing, stepping briskly to the front. "Your game is found out, Sandy Crawley, and the whole scheme is exposed. Your confederate, Jim Han-ley, is locked up in the New Madrid jail, waiting for you to join him."

This was another blow, and it told Sandycraw that his scheme was indeed exposed.

Sheriff Heilman again took a hand, and played what he considered a trump card.

"You men on that boat, I want to warn you that you had better not do a thing that will help that man to escape from the law. If you do, you will be tried and sent to jail for it, as sure as shootin'!"

This threat had an effect upon some of the men on the Gazelle, but produced no visible results.

Sheriff Heilman and his friends doubtless had authority to back them; but they were still on their own boat, while Sandycraw and Berry Sanders were right there, and it was known what they could and would do when they made up their minds to it.

Colonel Tazewell believed that the time had come to show himself and his party, and he stepped forward with Clifford Darrell and Jack Jones.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

SANDYCRAW'S STRATEGY.

THE sight of Colonel Tazewell and young Darrell was bad enough; but to see Jack Jones with them was the finishing blow to Sandycraw.

That Jack should be free, or apparently so, instead of being locked up in the New Madrid jail, and that he should be accompanied by the very man from whom the gambler had desired to shut him off entirely, was proof positive to

Crawley that his scheme had utterly miscarried that all the New Madrid business had been found out, and that nothing but flight could save him from a long term of imprisonment.

How did Colonel Tazewell and Clifford Darrall happen to be there?

How had they been put on his trail, and what had they learned that made it to their interest to hunt him down?

He could not doubt that they were there for the purpose of hunting him down, and his personal hatred of Colonel Tazewell at that moment was so intense that the life of that gentleman would have been in serious jeopardy if Crawley had thought it advisable to begin the shedding of blood.

But he did not pause to consider any of those perplexing questions, nor did he suffer his mind to dwell upon them longer than the space of a moment.

A wave of wonder and wrath swept over him, and then he was wide awake, full of grit and energy, and quite equal to the emergency that confronted him.

His scheme had been discovered, his plot had been exploded, and he was a fugitive from justice, hunted by the officers of the law, and liable to a severe penalty for a most flagrant crime.

This was by no means in accordance with his intention, and he had never believed it possible that he would be placed in such a position.

There he was, however, and he realized that a crisis had come, and was fully determined that he would not be taken alive.

Indeed, there seemed to be no sufficient reason why he should be taken at all.

Disdaining to hold any further parley with the men on the Mountaineer, he issued quick and sharp orders to the engineer to pack on all the steam possible, and directed the pilot to get out of the way of that very obnoxious stern-wheel boat.

In the contest of speed and maneuvering that ensued, Crawley presumed rather too easily that the Gazelle would get the best of it, as he knew that she was fast, and she was fast for so small a craft; but the Mountaineer was a bigger boat, and, like some of the stern-wheelers that were built for towing, she had more power than she might be supposed to have.

She was very fast, either down or up-stream, as long as she could go straight ahead; but at turning she was necessarily unwieldy, and it was there that the advantage of the Gazelle came in, as she had a wheel on each side, acting independently, one being able to go ahead while the other backed, so that she could turn with ease and in a very small space.

As soon as it became evident that the Gazelle meant to try to escape from the Mountaineer, Dan Thedford, who was well acquainted with the stern-wheeler, mentioned her ability to Colonel Tazewell, and that gentleman entered into the spirit of the thing immediately.

"Run her down!" he shouted, issuing his orders to everybody in general and nobody in particular.

"Run her down! Crack on the steam, boys! Chase her up and run her down!"

Sheriff Heilman protested that the Mountaineer would be quite as liable to be sunk in a ramming experiment as the Gazelle would be.

"I don't care," fiercely replied the colonel. "We must take that scoundrel, no matter what it costs. Chase her up and run her down!"

Naturally the Gazelle had something to say about that, and the men who were managing her were not at all idle or neglectful of their chances.

Sandycraw, who was an old hand at steam-boating, had ordered that all inflammable and quickly-heating substances that could be found on the boat—except, of course, the liquors—should be used for the purpose of producing steam, without regard to cost.

So kegs of lard and sides of bacon, with other odds and ends of fat and grease, were recklessly thrown into the furnace, and the little engines fairly jumped as the steam rose rapidly.

All this was not enough, as the Mountaineer, who was working her boilers in about the same style, sensibly gained on the Gazelle in the race up-stream, greatly to the delight of the people on board of her.

There was only the race and the maneuvering, as neither party attempted to injure the other by the use of weapons.

Sandycraw, who knew that his force was overmatched, and was not at all sure that he could depend upon his men when it came to fighting the law, did not wish to increase the burden of guilt that was already heavy upon him.

Sheriff Heilman and his associates wanted to take their men alive, and therefore would not resort to shooting except in a desperate extremity.

When it was evident that the Mountaineer was gaining on her, the Gazelle began to turn to account her strategical advantages.

Turning quickly, she shot across the current, and another quick turn headed her down-stream.

As the Mountaineer had only one wheel, and that was hung at her stern, it took her much longer to accomplish this maneuver, and, by the

time she was fully turned, the Gazelle was flying down the river at a considerable distance from her.

Of course the bigger boat made the better speed when she had got fairly under way in the right direction, and those on board of her could not imagine what the Gazelle expected to gain by changing her course, as she would not be allowed to play the dodging trick again.

Sandycraw, however, knew what he was doing, and it had taken him no time at all to mature his plan.

He meant to get where the Mountaineer could not follow him, by running up the creek which he had lately come out of.

In spite of the Hitchleys, Spoon Lake would be far safer for him than the Mississippi River, and he did not believe that they could prevent him and Berry Sanders from getting ashore and escaping into the country, if it should be necessary to do so.

In that event he would turn the Gazelle over to his pilot, who would probably not be hindered from disposing of her according to his instructions.

So the men on the Mountaineer were more than surprised when they saw the little boat head over to the Arkansas shore, and disappear among the trees, as if she had run into the woods.

The sharp eyes of the Mountaineer's pilots perceived the mouth of the creek, if they had not already known that there was one there, and they hastened to let their employers know what they supposed to have been done.

"Follow them up!" ordered Colonel Tazewell. "We will chase them all over the State of Arkansas, if we have to."

So the Mountaineer followed the Gazelle into the creek, and directly found herself stuck in the mud, and wedged between the banks.

The Gazelle had already gone out of sight around a bend of the stream.

This was a pretty pickle, as all the men on the Mountaineer agreed; but it did not take them long to decide what was the best thing to be done.

"They have got the best of us so far," said Sheriff Heilman; but their advantage won't hold long. It will be impossible for them to go far, even with that light boat of theirs. If we can't chase them any further on the water, we can follow them on the land, and that is what we must pitch in and do."

The pilots were consulted, and they had no doubt that the creek was a "sure enough" creek, and not a bayou or cut-off.

Therefore, the fugitives could get no further than its head, or as far as its channel would allow them to go.

It was quickly settled that the land-route must be taken as soon as possible, but considerable time was occupied in making the necessary preparations for the new departure, though all on board worked with a will, including Mrs. Crebbs.

It was deemed proper, in view of the possible or even probable exigencies of the expedition, to take not only their arms and ammunition, but a supply of provisions, together with axes, tar-paulins for tents, and a few cooking utensils—in fact, a pretty complete camping outfit.

There were plenty to carry these articles, besides the fighting men, whose number was eight, and it was increased to nine by one of the pilots, who insisted on joining the party.

As soon as the outfit was ready, the pursuers started, headed by Tom Heilman and his two deputies, who were better acquainted than the others with the nature of the ground which they would be required to traverse.

It was thought best to follow the creek pretty closely, lest they should lose it in the dense forest, with its tangled masses of vines and undergrowth, and it was also supposed that they might find the Gazelle stuck fast somewhere in the little stream.

Following the winding of the creek necessarily lengthened the route, and time was required to find and in some places to make a path, as there were various obstructions in the shape of sloughs and marshes.

Nothing was seen of the Gazelle, and when a dark night came on, and the obstructions and other difficulties increased with the darkness, the party found it impossible to proceed further, and were driven to the sad conclusion that they would be obliged to camp where they were and wait for morning.

Then they suddenly came in sight of Spoon Lake, though it was separated from them by a strip of marsh.

Getting as near as possible to the shore, they could see the Gazelle anchored in the middle of the lake, but could see nothing else.

A dry spot was found after a short search, and the party prepared their camp and their supper.

Mrs. Crebbs, who had accompanied them in spite of their remonstrances, proved to be very useful at this juncture, and was recognized as a valuable member of the expedition.

It being certain that the Gazelle was there at hand, the future course of the pursuing party was discussed in a general council of war after supper, and it was agreed that the first thing

necessary was to render it impossible for the little boat to get out of the lake.

This would make their minds easy concerning the nearly deserted Mountaineer, and would permit them to use such of her crew as should be willing to volunteer for the expedition.

So men were sent to close up the creek by felling trees across it at a point a little east of the lake.

CHAPTER XXIX.

BEN SOMES CHIPS IN.

The Hitchley family got safely to the shore of the lake, with the exception of the one who had landed on the "other" shore, and they tramped home in a discomfited and sadly demoralized condition.

There they were received with wailing and lamentation, especially from the widow and orphans of the missing man, and the remainder of the night was anything but joyful to them.

When they went to bed, the sky was lighted by their burning raft, and when they awoke at a rather late hour in the morning, they discovered that the Gazelle had slipped away and disappeared.

They were gloomy, depressed and repentant.

Not only did the women blame them for the sad misadventure of their nefarious enterprise, but they hated themselves for the foolishness that had got them into such a scrape.

They sadly realized the fact that by alienating and attacking their late friends they had only succeeded in doing themselves a great deal of damage.

Perhaps, too, if they had succeeded, by a further loss of life, in capturing the Gazelle, they might have discovered that they had made a "water-haul," as the man who told the story of the treasure was so drunk that a whole swarm of bees was buzzing in his head.

The old man was blamed by all the others for believing such a yarn, and he was so cast down that he could not say a word in his own defense.

At about the hour of noon they were seated in the shade near the cabin, drawing the wet loads from their rifles, and cleaning the weapons for future use, when they were surprised by the advent of a stranger.

The stranger was a man, and he came out of the woods, of course, but from the westward, and consequently could not be supposed to be one of the Gazelle's men.

He was not a countryman, however—neither a squatter nor an Arkansas farmer—and he had the unmistakable look of a city tough, his appearance as to clothing and general style being almost identical with that of Berry Sanders.

In truth, he was no other than Ben Somes, the third partner in the Gazelle's expedition.

When he had slipped out of the court-house upon the arrest of Jim Hanley, he had at once shaken the dust of New Madrid from his feet, and had as speedily as possible made his way to Spoon Lake, which he would have reached somewhat sooner if he had not been delayed by losing his way.

He felt very sorry and apprehensive for Jim Hanley, but was naturally glad that he himself was safe and likely to prosper.

It was certain that his share of the "swag" would be a big thing for him, and he had no doubt that he would find the Gazelle and his partners at Spoon Lake, when the "stuff" would be divided, and he would be free to go where he pleased.

His surprise and grief could only be expressed by a strong stream of profanity, when he reached the lake and saw nothing of the Gazelle there.

He soon came across the Hitchleys, and inquired of them if they had seen anything of a small steamboat of that description.

This was a tough question for the tribe, after their performance of the night before, and it gave them no small amount of uneasiness.

The younger men looked reproachfully at old Hiram, as if they felt that he was responsible for all the trouble, and Ben Somes looked from one to the other of them, as if wondering at their hesitation in answering such a simple question.

Uncle Hiram would have been willing to lie about the matter, denying all knowledge of the Gazelle, if he had felt that he could be supported in his denial; but the looks that were cast upon him by the other members of the family convinced him that he had better stick to the truth and make a clean breast of it, as far as his cunning and crooked nature would allow him to do so.

"Air you a friend o' his'n?" he asked.

"A friend of what?" inquired Somes.

"Of Sandy Crawley?"

"Of course I am. That's what brought me here. He and I are old friends and partners. My name is Ben Somes, and I am from St. Louis. He was to be here with the Gazelle, and I was to meet him here. Didn't he say anything to you about me?"

"Not as I heerd on," answered the old man, who was caught at once by the shrewd question.

"He has been here, then?"

"Wal, yes, he has kinder been hyar. He came up hyar in that leetle steamboat you spoke

about, and stayed around a bit; but he went away 'arly this mornin'."

"Why did he go? Something must have happened to drive him away. He promised to wait for me, and I know that he would never have gone unless he had been obliged to. What was the matter?"

"Wal, Mr. Somes, the fact is that he had a sort o' difficulty with we'-uns."

"With you? Why, he told me that you were old friends of his, and that he was sure of having a good time here. What sort of a difficulty can be have had with you?"

By degrees and under close questioning the whole truth came out, and Ben Somes was worried and indignant.

"That is as mean a thing as I ever heard of," said he. "You got nothin' more than you deserved, if one of your men was rubbed out, and I am sure that you can't blame Sandy for that. And so you believed the yarn that Berry Sanders told you? You made a man as drunk as a beast, and when he gave you a lot of fool talk you sucked it all in."

"Warn't it true?" feebly inquired the old man.

"Not a word of truth in it. Berry is one of the biggest liars livin' when he's sober, and when he's drunk he lies faster'n a hoss can trot. We hain't robbed a bank—we're above that sort o' business—and I don't believe that Sandy carries any money to speak of on that boat. Oh, you made the biggest kind of a botch of it, old man, and it's a durned shame that you ran off Sandy and the boat when he'd promised to wait here for me."

To show their repentance for the last night's performance—the repentance being caused mainly by the unpleasant fact that they had made such a sad and costly mistake, the Hitchleys invited Ben Somes to take dinner with them, and did their best to make him comfortable.

After dinner they were seated outside of the cabin, smoking their pipes, and Ben Somes, still greatly depressed, was fretting about the situation and wondering where he should go to find his partners and the "swag."

Suddenly, greatly to his delight, and greatly to the surprise of all the others, the Gazelle came into view, steaming out of the creek into the lake, in the middle of which she anchored.

"There she is!" shouted Ben Somes. "That is better luck than I had looked for. It's all right now. I forgive you, Mr. Hitchley, and forgive the whole crowd of you. If I had some whisky, I would ask you to take a drink all around."

Hiram Hitchley was not so jubilant, as he was occupied just then in wondering what had brought the Gazelle back there.

Had Sandy Crawley found some friends—rough river-men or something of that kind—and come back to wreak vengeance upon the Hitchleys for their mean and treacherous behavior?

That seemed to be the most reasonable view to take of the case, and the old man was greatly disturbed in his mind as he reflected on the possibilities of a campaign against his tribe.

Still, as the Gazelle had anchored out yonder, there was some consolation in feeling that Crawley was in no hurry to begin his bloody work.

Ben Somes went down to the shore, and waved his hat to attract the attention of those on the steamboat.

He was seen but not recognized, and his performance merely amazed them.

He ran back to Hiram Hitchley, and wanted to know if there was not a boat of some kind that would carry him out to the Gazelle.

The dug-out was brought forward and cleared of water, and a paddle was given to him.

"I wish you'd kinder say a good word fur us when you see Sandy Crawley," entreated Hiram Hitchley. "Tell him that 'twas all a mistake, and we didn't mean no harm, and one of my boys got killed, and we're pow'ful sorry, and would be glad to be friends ag'in."

"All right, old man. I know what to say to Sandy, and will straighten the business up for you."

Ben Somes paddled away briskly, and soon reached the Gazelle, where he was joyfully received by Sandycraw and Berry Sanders.

They expressed surprise that he had, under the circumstances, escaped from the Hitchleys with his life.

"Oh, that's all right," he answered, cheerfully. "I fixed that business up with 'em, and they're as good as pie now. I told 'em that Berry had been lyin', that his yarn was only a whisky dream of his, that there wasn't any money to speak of on the boat, and that they'd had all their fuss fur nothin'. That broke 'em all up, and the old man said that he was sorry that they had played such a game, and that he would like to make it up with you and be friends again."

"Do you believe he means it?" queried Sandycraw. "I hope he does, as we are needing friends just now, and it would go hard with us to find ourselves between two fires here."

"What do you mean?"

Crawley related the encounter with the Mountaineer in the Mississippi, the pursuit of the Gazelle, and her forced return to Spoon Lake, giving the information which he had derived from that unpleasant experience.

"I reckon they gave it to you straight," remarked Somes, as his countenance fell. "Jim Hanley had been arrested when I lit out of Madrid, and the whole business was bu'sted wide open. But we've got the stuff, and that is a comfort."

"Yes, if we can keep it, and if we can save ourselves."

"I believe that those folks ashore will do the fair thing by us now, and we had better see them and get them to stand by us, if you think there is likely to be trouble."

CHAPTER XXX.

"SATAN APPEARED ALSO."

It was settled that Sandycraw and Ben Somes should visit the Hitchleys as the latter had suggested, and they two went ashore together in the miniature skiff belonging to the Gazelle, towing the dug-out back to where it belonged.

They also carried two bottles of whisky for the purpose of propitiating their late foes.

Though the Hitchleys were considerably embarrassed by the interview that followed, their spirits revived under Sandycraw's cordiality and the influence of the liquor, and friendly relations were again established between the two parties on what seemed to be a firm footing.

Furthermore, a defensive alliance was arranged, after a consultation in which money and the promise of more money figured pretty plainly.

Without indicating the nature or cause of the peril that really threatened him, Sandycraw explained that he had reason to fear that he would be followed to that spot by personal enemies, and the agreement of the Hitchleys was that they would aid him in defending himself against his foes.

The result of these negotiations was vastly pleasing to the younger Hitchleys after their visitors had left them.

Again they blamed the old man for having been led away by a liar, and told him that the present state of affairs proved that it would have been a paying business for him to "keep in" with Sandy Crawley and his party.

Old Hiram was not as sure of that as they were, and he stated his doubts freely.

"It may turn out," said he, "that you are all wrong, and that I was right from the start. What sort of a yarn is it that Sandy Crawley tells now about folks a-follerin' of him up? What sort o' folks do you reckon they mought allow to be? S'posin' they should turn out to be sheriff's officers? What would they be follerin' him up fur? 'Cause he's been robbin' a bank, as t'other feller said, and has got the plunder on the leetle boat out thar. Ain't a sober man more likely to lie than a drunk man? O' course he is, as he's got his wits about him, and it's allus said that when drink is in, the truth comes out."

These remarks impressed the younger Hitchleys and made them feel uneasy; but they reminded the old man that the cash they had received from Crawley was something solid, which spoke for itself.

"What have we got to do fur it?" he replied. "Resk our lives, I reckon, and is thar enough of it to pay fur gittin' killed? Ef it's sheriff's officers that's follerin' him, would we dar' to buck ag'inst 'em? Thar's enough ag'inst us a'ready, boys, ef anybody chose to rake it up."

While the Hitchleys were discussing these points and getting into a condition of uncertainty, Sandycraw and his comrades were considering matters connected with their own safety and interests.

It was dark when he got back to the Gazelle, and by the time supper was over, night had fairly set in.

The question of immediate importance was whether their pursuers would or could follow them up to Spoon Lake, and if so, what would then be the best course for the hunted men to take.

It was certain that the Mountaineer could not come up the creek; but the men on board of her might, if they were sufficiently determined and persistent in the pursuit, follow the fugitives by land, and make it hot for them at Spoon Lake.

In that event Crawley and his friends might fight them off with the aid of the Hitchley tribe; but they were far from sure that they could rely confidently on the tricky and greedy squatters.

If the Hitchleys should see a better prospect for themselves in joining the enemy than in sticking to their present allies, the allies might reasonably expect to be deserted.

Anyhow, the way was open, and would probably remain open, for an escape through the forest and into the country at the westward, where a search for them would be like looking for a needle in a haystack.

These points were only discussed, as it was not necessary to settle anything at that time, except that it would be advisable to await developments before coming to any conclusion.

As for the probability of pursuit to Spoon Lake, that question settled itself shortly.

Before the night was far advanced the campfire of the Mountaineer's men was easily seen shining through the trees, its light made vivid by the intense darkness.

Of course the people at the camp could not expect to do anything that night; but it was thought best to be prepared for any move that they might make in the morning, and therefore Ben Somes was sent ashore to notify the Hitchleys and secure their co-operation in case of an attack.

Before he returned, another startling development occurred.

The ominous sound of the blows of axes and the falling of trees in the direction of the creek told a story which Sandy Crawley understood only too well.

Ben Somes brought back the report that the Hitchleys had agreed easily enough to all he proposed, but that he was afraid that they were insincere and shaky.

"Those duffers who are after us mean business," remarked Sandycraw. "They are sharp, too, and have done the very thing that the Hitchley scalawags ought to have done if they wanted to catch us in a trap."

"What is that?" inquired Ben.

"They have been cutting down trees and dropping them across the creek down yonder, so as to close it against all kinds of navigation. There is no chance for the Gazelle to get back to the Mississippi now, unless we whip that crowd and kill them or drive them away."

"And that would be too heavy a job for us to undertake, Sandy, considering the shakiness of the Hitchleys."

"Yes, indeed, and I don't propose to bid a dollar on any such contract."

"Then we will have to skip out!"

"Perhaps we will; but we can do that at any time. The Gazelle is a steamboat yet, and she can move about as she pleases, and can land us just where our enemies don't happen to be. But there is one thing that we must do this very night."

"What's that, then?"

"We must go ashore and bury our plunder. Whatever happens, we must make sure that the stuff is safe."

Ben Somes objected to this, as he did not relish the idea of going away, if they should be forced to fly, and leaving that valuable property behind them.

He proposed that they should divide it then and there, and that each should take his share and be responsible for it; but there was nobody to take and be responsible for Jim Hanley's share, which was of course considered sacred to him. Berry Sanders agreed with the chief, and Ben Somes soon came around to the opinion of the others.

"I don't see how we can do it, though," he objected. "It is as dark as a stack of black cats. The clouds are so heavy that they don't give the moon the least bit of a chance."

"That is baby talk, Ben," declared Sandycraw. "Think of those men who have been cutting down trees over yonder, and who are at it yet. Do they let the darkness hinder them? If we can't be as smart as they are, our chance will be a poor one. Don't talk about darkness. The darkness is just what we want."

The partners went ashore in the Gazelle's little skiff, or dinghy, which was loaded to the water's edge by the three of them and the gripsack that held the plunder; but all insisted on going, as each was necessary to watch the others, and each wanted to know the hiding-place of the "stuff."

A lantern was carried, which was not to be lighted until they were safe in the woods, and an ax and a spade.

There was no danger that they would be seen, and Ben Somes, who took the oars, rowed softly, and Sandycraw acted as pilot and directed the course of the skiff.

The point at which he aimed was at a considerable distance alike from the Hitchley habitation and from the camp of the Mountaineer's men, and the skiff was landed in the midst of a mass of foliage, where it was easily drawn up and concealed.

At the landing there was a gigantic sycamore, which would serve admirably as a landmark.

Sandycraw took the lead, and headed direct from the big sycamore into the forest, blazing a tree occasionally as he went along, and kept as straight a course as possible, until he might have built a fire without attracting the attention of anybody on or about the lake.

He halted in a little glade—a small circular spot where no trees grew, though there were plenty of big ones around it.

The place selected for hiding the "stuff" was near the foot of one of the big trees, and the lantern was lighted, that the men might see how to do their work.

Leaves were strewn over the tramped-down filling, and the marks of the workers were thus completely effaced.

The big tree received two blazes to mark the burial place of the treasure and other trees about the glade were blazed more slightly.

Then the party extinguished their light,

found their way in the darkness back to the skiff, and returned to the Gazelle as silently as they had come.

Shortly after they had got out of sight of the glade, and before they reached the shore of the lake, a woman stepped forth from the deep darkness of the forest, a tall and gaunt woman, with a wrinkled face and piercing black eyes.

The description will be easily recognized as that of Madame Lavalette, the Creole fortune-teller, and she it was.

"Another fine plot," she said with a sneer. "It is wonderful how easily these fine plots miscarry. How carefully they have buried the treasure they stole, and how safe it is! Yes, how safe it is!"

CHAPTER XXXI.

A FEMALE ALLIANCE.

THE weather was hot at Spoon Lake, and mosquitoes were abundant.

During the day the black gnats were the special pests; but at night the mosquitoes revolved and sounded their trumpets triumphantly.

At the camp of the Mountaineer a tent had been made for Mrs. Crebbs by laying a pole across two crotched stakes and stretching a tarpaulin over it.

She was not altogether pleased with being tented in that way, and felt that she might have passed the night quite as pleasantly in the open air, if not a little more so.

Finding herself sleepless, oppressed by the heat and worried by the insects, she crept out from under the shelter, and discovered that the night had become clear and fine.

The storm that had threatened had not transpired, the heavy clouds that had covered the sky had been blown away, the moon was shining, and the air had become cooler.

Attracted by the beauty of the night, Mrs. Crebbs wandered away from the camp, and got down to the shore of the lake, where she could see its entire expanse, with the Gazelle plainly visible at a little distance.

On that boat was the man who had slain her father, and upon whom she had vowed vengeance, and it was a joy to her to feel that she had been largely instrumental in bringing his present calamity upon him.

She knew that the creek had been barred, and that the Gazelle was shut up there like a rat in a trap, with no chance to escape.

Could Sandy Crawley escape? If not, would the penalty for the bank burglary be sufficient punishment for his crimes as she looked at them?

She thought that there ought to be something more, and hoped that there might be something more.

As she stood there, meditating these matters, she was startled by the sudden appearance of a woman, who seemed to have risen out of the ground.

There was no mistaking that tall and gaunt old woman with the withered face and the bright black eyes.

Though Mrs. Crebbs had seen her but once, and could not have the faintest expectation of meeting her there, she recognized her instantly.

"Is it really you?" she asked, in wonder.

"Of course it is. Did you take me for a ghost? You have not forgotten me, then?"

"You are Madame Lavalette. You are his mother."

"To my shame I must admit it. I have done much evil in my life, but the worst thing I ever did was bringing that wicked man into the world. There is nothing of me in him. He is like nobody but his father, who was a terror."

"He is a bad man," assented Mrs. Crebbs.

"And you are the woman who lived with him as his wife."

"I hate myself when I confess that I am. But, if I had known what I now know, I would never have entered his house or taken a dollar of his money."

"I know what you mean. He killed your father, and caused the death of your brother."

"How did you know that I was connected with the man he murdered in what they called a duel?"

"I have my ways of finding out things. But he does not know it, unless you have told him."

"You may be sure that I have not."

"Well, you have done what you could to get even with him, but it was not enough. Do you want to do more?"

"Everything that I can do."

"You want to see the end of it, I suppose, and the end will soon come. It is a long lane that has no turning, and his has made a sharp and sudden turn. If you want to see the end of it, you must come with me."

"Where will you take me to?" inquired Mrs. Crebbs.

"To the end of the lane."

"The lane that has turned?"

"Yes."

"How far will that be?"

"It is a pretty long walk; but you will be safe. Are you afraid to go with me?"

"I am not afraid; but my friends will not

know what has become of me, and they will be very uneasy when they miss me."

"Go back and leave word for them. There must be somebody awake at your camp. You need not tell them who I am. I will stay here and wait for you."

Mrs. Crebbs, who believed implicitly in Madame Lavalette's powers as a seer, was anxious to be "in at the death," and her mind was quickly made up.

She hastened back to the camp, and spoke to the man on guard there, who happened to be one of Sheriff Heilman's deputies.

"When Colonel Tazewell gets up," said she, "I wish you would tell him that I have met a friend here, a woman, and that I have gone away with her. I don't know when I will be back; but it is important that I should go."

"Beg your pardon, ma'am," answered the deputy; "but are you sure that it is safe? This is a ticklish country, in more ways than one."

"I am quite sure that it is safe for me."

"Can you shoot a gun, ma'am—I mean a pistol?"

"Indeed I can, and I have one of my own."

"Glad to hear it. I was going to offer to lend you one, as you might need it."

"If I should, I can use the revolver that I have. Please say nothing about this to Colonel Tazewell, or anybody else before they wake in the morning, and tell them then that they need not worry about me a bit."

Tom Heilman's deputy was by no means sure that Mrs. Crebbs was about to do the right thing, or the safe thing; but he was a gallant young fellow, who was not going to stand in the way of a woman's will.

Mrs. Crebbs returned to Madame Lavalette, and told her what she had done.

"That is right," said the old woman. "I am glad to see that you're not afraid to go with me."

"Why should I be afraid?"

"You ought not to be; but some women have such foolish ways. Come on, then!"

The journey through the forest that followed was tedious, and wearisome to Mrs. Crebbs, though her companion did not seem to mind it at all.

Madame Lavalette went straight ahead, without turning to the right or the left, and without pausing to consider her route, following as straight a course as if she had carried a compass.

It was near daybreak, and Mrs. Crebbs was pretty well tired out when they reached their destination.

It proved to be the cabin which Sandy Crawley had visited when he lost his way in the forest.

A light was shining through the chinks and out at the open door, where a negro woman stood, looking forth as if waiting for somebody.

It was Madame Lavalette for whom she was waiting, as she sprung forward when the old woman drew near, and literally "kissed the hem of her garment."

"You may go now, Rachel," said the fortuneteller.

"Yes, missus."

"And you need not come back. I shall not want you any more."

"Won't you come to see us pore folks ag'in, missus?"

"I will if I can."

"Oh, you kin do anyfin' you want to, missus. and we pore folks is allus mighty glad and proud to see you."

"I will come if I can. Run along, Rachel."

The negro woman disappeared in the forest, and Madame Lavalette led her companion into the cabin.

It was a single small room, with a clay fireplace, a rude couch covered with blankets in a corner, some blocks of wood for seats, and a very few cooking utensils.

The blankets and cooking utensils had been brought there by the negroes from whose settlement Rachel had come, and they had ministered to the wants of the Creole, who was evidently held by them in great reverence.

Mrs. Crebbs was full of curiosity, and asked many questions which the old woman did not answer very freely.

"How did you get here, and why did you come?" she wanted to know.

"Oh, it was easy enough to get here, and I came for the same reason that you are here now—to get to the end of the lane—to see the last of Sandy Crawley."

"How did you know that you would find him here?"

"How did I know? How do I know many things that people believe I could never find out? But that was simple enough, and I will tell you about it. I knew that some big piece of villainy was on foot, and that a man named Berry Sanders was connected with it. He came to see me, and I got him drunk, and he told me all about it. He is an open-mouthed idiot when he is full."

"That was simple, indeed."

"Many strange things are simple enough when you know how they are done. He came here to visit me a little while ago."

"Your son came here?"

"Sandy Crawley came."

"How did he know that you were here?"

"He did not know it, or he would never have come near me. He had been hunting, he said, and had lost his way, and he called here to find out how he could get back to Spoon Lake. He was glad to get away; but he will come back, and will come soon."

"How do you know that?"

"I am sure of it, and that is enough."

Mrs. Crebbs was so thoroughly convinced of the ability of Madame Lavalette as a seer and a person who was generally aware of everything, that she ceased to wonder, and asked no more questions.

CHAPTER XXXII.

QUELLING THE HITCHLEY TRIBE.

THERE was naturally much wonder and no little uneasiness in the camp of the Mountaineer's men when they discovered that Mrs. Crebbs had disappeared—not mysteriously, perhaps, but at least very strangely.

Some were disposed to doubt whether she was in her right mind; but the man who had been on guard declared positively that when she spoke to him she was in the full possession of her senses, and evidently knew what she was about.

It seemed so impossible that she should have found a friend in that wilderness and at that hour of the night, that her statements were regarded as incredible, and it was only certain that she was missing.

As it was of course utterly useless to search for her, there was nothing for her friends to do but to go about their business and attend to the matter that had brought them there.

There was the Gazelle; but how was she to be got at?

Leaving a guard at the camp, the greater part of them sallied forth to reconnoiter, to get the lay of the land, and to settle upon a plan for effecting the capture of the robbers.

They had not gone far when they discovered the Hitchley homestead, and it instantly occurred to them that the friend of whom Mrs. Crebbs had spoken might be located there.

Inquiry of the Hitchleys elicited only the repeated declaration that they had seen no such woman and knew nothing about her.

Efforts were made to find out what the Hitchleys did know, and at first the efforts were not successful, as the squatters fought shy of answering questions; but after a while, and under pressure, the truth was gradually brought out.

They told when the Gazelle came there and went away and returned, and admitted that they were acquainted with Sandy Crawley and others on the boat, who had come on shore and visited them.

"Who air you'n's, anyway?" demanded Hiram Hitchley, becoming inquisitive in his turn. "Whar did you come from, and what did you come hyar fur?"

"I am the Sheriff of New Madrid county, Missouri," answered Tom Heilman, "and I have a warrant for the arrest of three men on that boat, who are charged with robbing a bank at New Madrid. There is no doubt that they did rob the bank of a large amount of money and other valuable property, and they have the plunder with them now, unless they have put it out of the way, which is not at all likely."

This statement opened the floodgates of truth in the breasts of the Hitchleys, and it poured forth as from a sluiceway, though they were careful to say nothing about their disastrous attempt to "coliar the swag."

"Just what I said," declared the old man. "I knowed it, and was sure of it, though the boys here was all ag'in me."

"What did you know, and how did you know it?" inquired Heilman.

"I knowed that Sandy Crawley an' t'others had robbed a bank up thar, just as you said, and that the money was on the little steamboat."

"How did you find that out?"

"One of the fellers—Berry Sanders his name is—got drunk and told me all about it."

"Did you believe him?"

"I did, 'cause a drunk man 'most allus tells the truth; but the boys wouldn't believe a word of it, 'cause they allowed that Sandy Crawley wasn't that kind of a man; but you can't most allus jest adzactly tell jest what sawt o' devilmint men is goin' to git into when they has the chance."

"Did you say anything to Crawley about it?"

"Wal, yes, I kinder hinted at it; but he faced me down and stood out that thar warn't a word o' truth in the story, and so did t'other chap who came along afterwards."

"Who was that?"

"Ben Somes he called himself."

"I reckon he knew his name, and he is one of the men we are bunting. So the gang are all together now, and we have got them in a hole, and are bound to corral them if we are anyway smart."

"Air you givin' it to me straight, mister? Is your business really what you say it 'tis?"

"You may bet your life it is, old man, and I

can tell you something more. Are you a friend of Sandy Crawley?"

"Wal, I knowed him long ago, though I hadn't see him in a good while, and I reckon I kin call myself his friend."

"Then what I've got to say is this: You had better drop your friendship, because he's not the kind of man that honest folks ought to mix with. More than that—if you show any friendship for him in the way of trying to help him out of the scrape he is in here, you will be in the same box with him, and will get more or less hurt, according as you behave."

"A nod is as good as a wink to a blind hoss," answered the old man. "We-uns don't want to help no bank-robbers, 'cause we're honest, though we're pore. Ef you want any help to ketch him—"

"No, we don't need any help, and all you have to do is to keep your hands off, or you may get hurt."

This settled the matter for the Hitchley tribe.

Such partial, or provisory, or contingent arrangement as they had made with Sandy Crawley and his friends with the view of defending them, for a consideration, against the wicked men who were supposed to be pursuing them, must be dropped instantly and entirely in the presence of officers of the law.

Not that the squatters had any special respect for the officers of the law; but they had a wholesome fear of them, and were not likely to side with the weaker party against the stronger.

Besides, there seemed to be no feasible way of effecting a junction between the land and naval forces of the recent combination, and the impossibility of communicating with the Gazelle offered a good opening for crawling out.

The Hitchleys, however, could easily content themselves with the thought that they need not risk their lives, and that the advance payment which they had received in consideration of the alliance was likely to remain with them.

The men from the Mountaineer, having settled this point, proceeded to consider the chances of capturing the Gazelle and the three men they wanted.

Two ways of effecting this object seemed to offer themselves, and two only.

If the Gazelle people chose to remain on board and in the middle of the lake—and there seemed to be nothing else for them to do—they must inevitably be starved out in time.

If it should not be deemed advisable to await that slow process, it would be necessary to organize some sort of a naval expedition for the capture of the little steamboat.

Concerning the latter plan, the Hitchleys might have given some valuable information if they had chosen to do so; but as to that subject their mouths were closed tightly.

Naturally, the idea of a raft occurred to Sheriff Heilman and his party, as there were no boats on the lake, and there was absolutely no other way of getting at the Gazelle.

A circumstance that fell under the observation of Amos Harding caused him to consult with Hiram Hitchley on this point.

"I have seen a raft or part of a raft aground near the shore," said he. "It is a queer piece of work, and it has been burned so as to be useless. I would like to know whether it was yours, and what you built such a raft for."

"Jest fur fishin'," answered the old man. "We built a fire on it when we was out at night, so's to draw the fishes, and I reckon we didn't put it out well enough, and it kep' on burnin'."

This explanation was not altogether satisfactory, but was accepted, as the matter was not worth inquiring into further.

"Then you know how to build such a raft as we want," suggested Harding.

"Wal, I reckon I might tell you how to cobble one up; but I'd advise you to build two rafts, so's to take the boat from two sides, or kinder surround her."

This was such good advice that it was at once adopted, and work was begun on the rafts as speedily as possible.

It would take time, but there was some satisfaction in knowing that in the mean while the starvation process would also be going on.

Hardly had the workers begun to cut down trees for the logs of the raft, when there was a new and interesting development, which made something of a change in the situation.

This was the arrival of a party of mounted men, fully a dozen in number, who had come to "look up" the Hitchley tribe, and arrest one or more of them on a charge of cattle-stealing.

Though the Hitchleys boasted of their honesty, they had been more than suspected for some time, and proof against them had finally been procured.

The party of mounted men was composed of the sheriff of the county in which Spoon Lake was situated, a posse of volunteer deputies, and two men to identify those who were presumed to be cattle-thieves.

By this development the Hitchleys were completely upset, and they wilted, individually, collectively, and all over.

Surrender was of course an absolute necessity, and two of the Hitchley young men were picked out by the identifiers and put under guard.

The new-comers were greatly surprised at finding a number of armed men at Spoon Lake, and yet more surprised at seeing the Gazelle anchored out in the lake; but their circumstances were quickly and satisfactorily explained when the two parties became acquainted.

The leader of the party from the interior introduced himself as Abner Barkley, sheriff of the county, and others who were with him as his friends and neighbors.

Tom Heilman made himself known as a sheriff from Missouri, introduced his companions, and explained the business that had brought them there.

When Abner Barkley and his friends were made aware of the fact that there were men on the little steamboat who were charged with such a heinous crime as bank robbery, they began to take a lively interest in the case.

When they learned the further fact that a reward was offered for the apprehension of the robbers, their interest grew stronger, and they eagerly offered to do all in their power to assist in the capture of the men who were wanted.

"Your Missouri warrant don't run in Arkansas, Mr. Heilman," observed Barkley; "but that don't count. If we can catch the men, and I reckon we can, you may take them away. It is a good thing, I can tell you, that you sat down on those Hitchley folks as soon as you did, as I am willing to bet that they would have taken the other side if they had got a chance."

Barkley and his friends dined with the Mountaineer men at their camp, and after dinner joined them in the labor of building the rafts.

To this work the Arkansans were admirably adapted, and it progressed so well during the afternoon that there was a good prospect for finishing it the next day.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

SANDYCRAW'S ESCAPE.

If any person on shore or elsewhere supposed that Sandycraw was going to stay cooped up there, like a rat with its hole stopped at the mouth, to await the process of slow starvation, or an encounter with a carefully organized raft navy, that person was mistaken in the man.

Anybody who was acquainted with Mr. Alexander Crawley, or with his reputation, must have known that he was not going to give up, or keep quiet, while there was a fighting chance for life or liberty.

In justice to the men from the Mountaineer it must be said that they did not expect him to give up or to keep quiet.

They expected him to make a fight from his vantage-point on the water, and were calculating on a hotly-contested naval battle, in which they believed that their log-clad gunboats would be victorious.

Sandycraw, however, had his own ideas of the matter, and was pretty well aware of his own intentions.

As for a naval engagement, the work on the rafts would be wasted, as he did not intend to fight any such battle.

The men on the Gazelle kept a close watch on the shore, and Sandycraw with his powerful glass kept a closer watch than anybody else.

When he saw the party from the Mountaineer pounce down on the Hitchley habitation, he knew that his chance of help from that quarter was gone, and realized the fact that he had been foolish to attempt to enter into any negotiations with the squatters, because of the extreme difficulty of joining his forces with theirs.

The arrival of Abner Barkley's party from the interior was as great a surprise to him as to anybody else, and he could not imagine what it meant.

It was clear, however, that the new-comers were fraternizing with his pursuers, and therefore he could only conclude that a fresh lot of his enemies had arrived.

When work on the rafts was begun, and it was evident that two of them were to be constructed, the intention of his foes was manifest, and the safety of himself and his partners came up for consideration.

As he did not intend to fight if he could help it, there was only one thing to do, and that was the very thing which he had determined upon doing in such a contingency as had arrived.

He must go ashore with Ben Somes and Berry Sanders, and the three fugitives must strike through the forest and into the interior until they could reach a railroad and distance pursuit.

Of course this plan would have to wait until night, and it would seem to be entirely feasible then.

Though the number of his enemies on shore appeared to have considerably increased, there were still not enough of them to put anything like a complete cordon around the lake, much less to present a defensive front at any point where the Gazelle might choose to land, and Sandycraw had no doubt of his ability to get ashore and out of the way without being seriously hindered.

When he and his partners should be lost in

the depths of the forest, pursuit could be only a matter of guesswork and haphazard.

Having decided on this plan, he made his arrangements to suit it.

He drew up a bill of sale, transferring the Gazelle to her pilot, which he executed before witnesses.

He gave the pilot full instructions as to what he should do with the boat if he should be able to get her back to the Mississippi, and supplied him with money for expenses.

Then he explained his plan to his two partners in the bank robbery, and they agreed to it at once, as there was really nothing else left for them to do.

The only difference of opinion between the three was concerning the disposal of the "stuff" which they had buried the night before, and this discussion was carried on quietly, so that none of the others on the boat should get a hint of the whereabouts of the plunder.

Ben Somes was decidedly of the opinion that they ought to dig it up and take it with them, as they were going far away, and it might be a long time before they or either of them could come back and get it.

To this Sandycraw objected that in all probability it would be as much as they could do to take care of themselves, and that they would have not a bit of time or thought for anything except their own safety.

Besides, only one of them could carry the "boodle," and the others might not be entirely willing to trust him with it, as the plan was that they should separate, so as to divide and distract pursuit.

By far the better plan, in his opinion, would be to strike out through the woods and the country until they could reach a railroad, and rendezvous, say, at Texarkana, which would be as safe a place for them as they could find.

The "stuff" in the meantime would be safe where they had buried it, as they only knew where it was, and none of them could interfere with it until their present trouble should blow over, when they would come and resurrect it.

Berry Sanders agreed with his chief on these points, and Ben Somes was obliged to assent to the opinion of the majority, though he gave in reluctantly.

A little before dusk Sandycraw played a game that was intended to impress his adversaries with the belief that the men they were hunting were not the least bit afraid of them.

The Gazelle's anchor was pulled up, and she steamed over toward where the men were working on the raft, running so close to the shore that she could easily be hauled.

As the pilot was nervous about making this venture, Crawley took the wheel.

The Mountaineer's men were amazed at his audacity, but did not lose the use of their tongues.

"You had better surrender," shouted Sheriff Heilman. "You can't get out of the lake, and we are bound to have you sooner or later."

"You had better leave here before you get hurt," answered Sandycraw. "Let me tell you one thing—I've got a howitzer on board, and it is loaded with grape, and I will wipe out your whole crowd if you bother me too much."

This was mere bravado, as there was no such piece of artillery on the Gazelle; but the men on shore did not know that, though the statement seemed incredible to them.

The Gazelle steamed back to her former position, but did not anchor, as Sandycraw had noted the best point for making a landing, and only awaited the proper time for action.

That time was near at hand, as the early part of the night was dark, and it was deemed best to get ashore and into the woods before the moon rose.

It proved to be so dark that the project of running the Gazelle to the shore was abandoned, and Sandycraw and his partners, after saying farewell to their friends on the steamboat, got into the little skiff and started for the shore.

They presumed that their attempt would not be discovered in the darkness, and that nothing of the kind would be suspected while the Gazelle kept her position in the middle of the lake.

So they proceeded silently and cautiously, as they had done when they went to bury the plunder, and reached the shore, as they had reason to believe, without having been observed by their enemies.

The combined land forces, however, had done what they could to prevent any escape from the Gazelle, by placing sentries around the lake, and the sentries, though far apart, were wide awake and vigilant.

One of them happened to be stationed near the very spot where the three fugitives landed from the dinghy, and their speech, though suppressed, quickly made him aware of their presence in his vicinity.

"Who goes there?" he hailed, having been a soldier. "Halt, or I'll fire."

There was no answer, and he hailed again, while the three men were creeping toward him as silently as snakes.

He fired his rifle at the spot where he had heard the voices, but hit nobody, and the next instant he was struck by a shot from Crawley's revolver.

The aim was deadly, and he fell, never to halt anybody any more.

"We must scatter and run for it, boys!" cried Sandycraw, knowing that the two shots would put their enemies on the alert and start an immediate pursuit.

They did run, and did scatter.

If they had wanted to keep together, they would probably not have been able to do so, in their haste and in the darkness; but they did not want to, as each had his own object in the flight.

The two shots had exactly the effect that Crawley supposed they would have, being heard all around the lake, and most of the Mountainer's men, with Abner Barkley and half of his posse, started in the direction of the reports.

It was at once understood that the men they were hunting had escaped or were attempting to escape, and all were eager to get on the trail.

Sandycraw had taken his bearings carefully when he was on the Gazelle, and he kept them in his head after he got ashore, in spite of the little difficulty that intervened there.

So he set off in the direction that he had marked out for himself, believing that if he could keep his course he would have no trouble.

He did not deem it necessary to make any special hurry after he got fairly into the forest, as nobody could be expected to trail him; but there were in pursuit of him men who had been trained from their boyhood to night-hunting, and whose senses were sharper than he supposed them to be.

More than that—they had with them a dog that was put on the scent of the three fugitives, and he happened to strike and follow the trail of Mr. Alexander Crawley.

The moon had risen and the clouds had partly cleared away, when Sandycraw heard the barking of the dog behind him, and began to realize the peril of his position.

Then he started to run at his best speed, but was incumbered by his rifle, which he was unwilling to throw away.

Ne'er came the barking of the dog, and sooner than he could have expected it he heard the sharp hail of a man.

Sandycraw turned immediately, and fired two shots in quick succession.

One of them killed the dog, and the other hit and disabled the man.

Before the man fell he fired at the fugitive, and Sandycraw felt a sharp pang in his right side.

Knowing that the shots would bring more of his pursuers in that direction, he hurried away and fell into a dry slough.

Struggling out, with the loss of his rifle, which he was really no longer able to carry, he discovered that he had sprained his ankle.

Then he dragged himself along, slowly and painfully, until he came in sight of a log-cabin, where he saw a light.

While he was debating whether he had better take refuge there, the door opened and a woman came out.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

TWO OF A KIND.

THE fact has been noted that each of the three fugitives had an object of his own in their flight.

Sandycraw's object was to secure his own safety, regardless of the fate of his comrades; but he was the unluckiest of the three, as the dog that came with the Arkansans struck his trail instead of theirs.

While Sandycraw struck off directly west, they started in a more northerly course, and kept together for a little while, but soon separated, as their divided interests impelled them to individual action.

Ben Somes heard the barking of the dog, and was at first badly frightened, as he knew that all was up with him if he could be successfully trailed.

The barking, however, appeared to take another direction, and gradually died away.

He believed, therefore, that he was safe from pursuit, and moderated the swift pace with which he had started.

He did not go much further, but sat on a log to rest and to wait.

Both he and Berry Sanders shared Sandycraw's belief that they would have nothing to fear after they got away into the forest, as the odds were largely against an effective pursuit in that wilderness.

In fact, they had imbibed this idea from him before they left the boat, where he had confidently insisted upon it.

The dog had shaken their belief; but his disappearance from their vicinity had naturally set it up again.

Ben Somes had a little game to play, which had come into his head on the Gazelle, and the details of which he had subsequently arranged in his mind.

It was a mean and treacherous game that he meant to play; but, in view of what he expected to get out of it, he may have argued that the end justified the means.

His scheme was to wait in hiding until the

pursuit or search should be over, when he would boldly sally forth, find the spot where the plunder was buried, dig up the gripsack and carry it away.

With a fortune in his possession, he might live at his ease all the rest of his life, seeking some foreign clime, or burying himself in the wilderness of a big city.

He waited until there was not the faintest sound of human life anywhere in the forest, and until he believed that the pursuit must have been abandoned, or must have led the pursuers far from his vicinity.

If one of his companions had been caught, it need not matter to him, as he would be all the safer for that, especially if Sandycraw happened to be the victim.

As for himself, it would be supposed that he had got so far away that it would be useless to hunt him.

The moon had risen when he got up from the log and sallied forth, and he found his way without difficulty through the forest and back over the route that he had taken in his flight.

The landing-place selected by Sandycraw that night had been, whether by accident or design, the same point at which he had landed with the others when they went to hide the "stuff."

Therefore Ben Somes, who was well aware of that fact, and who rejoiced in it with exceeding great joy, easily found the spot that he was seeking.

Taking the backward course toward the shore and remembering that he had passed through the glade in his flight, he reached the big blazed tree near the foot of which the plunder was buried.

There could be no doubt about the place, and he found himself alone there, and already he felt himself to be the sole possessor of the wealth that had been so easy to get, but had proved so hard to keep.

After looking about and listening, to make sure that there was nobody within sight or hearing, he knelt down, removed the leaves from the hiding place of the treasure, and began to dig up the earth with his knife and throw it out with his hands.

Then it was that fortune, which had thus far favored him so signally, suddenly turned against him, but in a way that he might have looked for if he had considered any other interests than his own.

The trouble was that Berry Sanders had been seized by the same idea that had taken hold of his comrade, and it was this intention of individual action that had caused them to separate so soon after their flight was begun.

Berry Sanders had adopted precisely the same course of reasoning and the same method of action that had been followed by his comrade, but must have gone a little further or waited a little longer than the other did.

Consequently he reached the spot at which both were aiming a little later than the other, arriving shortly after Ben Somes had begun to dig.

It was as natural that Berry Sanders should do this thing as that Ben Somes should do it, and at the same time nothing could be more natural than that Somes, intent on his own treacherous purpose, should not suspect his companion of aiming at the same mark.

The sight of the man digging there at the spot where the treasure was buried filled Sanders with righteous indignation.

"Oh, you traitor!" he cried. "You infernal scoundrel!"

"What's the matter with you?" demanded Somes as he jumped up.

"You have come here to steal our stuff."

"You're a liar."

"Haven't I caught you in the act?"

"What did you come here for, yourself?"

"What did I come for? Why, I came to look around and see if the stuff was safe."

"That is just what I came for."

"Did you have to dig it up to see if it was safe?"

"Look here, Berry," remarked Somes. "We are both liars, and each of us knows that the other is a liar. Reckon we'd better own up and speak the truth. Each of us came here to get ahead of the rest and steal the stuff. As neither of us can have it now, we had better both take it and divide it between us."

"All right, Ben—that's settled."

"Help me dig it up, then."

Hardly had they begun to dig, when there was another unpleasant interruption.

"Hold up your hands and surrender, or we'll shoot you down!"

Ben and Berry glanced around and looked into the barrels of four rifles, held by four men, who had them completely covered.

There was nothing to do but to obey orders, and they held up their hands, and were speedily secured as captives.

The four men were Colonel Tazewell, Dan Thedford, and two of the Arkansas party.

They had been at the other end of the lake, and by the time they reached the spot where the two shots had been fired, the pursuers were far away.

So they decided upon remaining there until their friends returned, and the sound of voices

near by caused them to creep up and capture the two fugitives.

They had heard enough to tell them what was the matter, and Colonel Tazewell hastened to question the prisoners.

"So this is the place where you buried the plunder you got at New Madrid?"

They could not help confessing that it was.

"And you came here to dig it up. Did you get it?"

They admitted that they had not got it.

"Then we will dig it up for you."

The excavation was speedily completed, but no treasure was found in the hole.

The india-rubber garment that had been wrapped around the gripsack was there; but the gripsack had disappeared.

Ben Somes and Berry Sanders stared at each other, full of amazement and indignation.

"'Twas Sandy Crawley who did that," cried the former. "He has got ahead of us, and has dug up the stuff and carried it away. That's the game he has been playin' on us all along. Oh, the villain!"

CHAPTER XXXV.

SANDYCRAW'S EXIT.

MRS. CREBBS had breakfast with Madame Lavalette in the cabin, and it was a better breakfast than she could have expected.

Before that she had become quite confidential with the old woman, and had told her how she had discovered the plot to rob the New Madrid bank and get Jack Jones into trouble, and the steps that had been taken to defeat the plot and capture the plotters.

After breakfast Madame Lavalette announced her intention of going away, to be absent several hours.

"I hope you will not be afraid to stay here without me," she said.

"Not I," firmly answered her guest.

"I am glad that you are so brave. There is one thing that I must tell you before I go, so that you may give the secret to those it belongs to, in case anything should happen to me."

"I hope no harm will happen to you, madame."

"There will, though. I am sure of that. I don't know just when, but it is bound to come soon. The secret is about that young man who is known as Jack Jones; but I suppose it has been as much as guessed at before now."

"Colonel Tazewell thinks that Jack is his son," suggested Mrs. Crebbs.

"He is right. Jack is his son who was stolen from his home when he was an infant by Dave Wenham. I have known that for a long time. On this bit of paper—take it and keep it safely—I have written the name of the woman who took care of him in Cincinnati when Dave Wenham brought him up from Kentucky. She knows all about him, as Wenham told her who he was, and she has kept track of him since then. She is still living, and can be found at the address I have put on the paper."

Mrs. Crebbs was glad to be able to render Colonel Tazewell such a great service, and she began to have a high opinion of Madame Lavalette.

The old woman went away, and her guest found it very lonesome in the cabin after that, especially as she was quite restless and uneasy.

She was worried because of the trouble her absence from the camp might have given her friends, and was anxious to know how the business in which she was engaged with them was going to turn out.

She had by that time implicit confidence in Madame Lavalette's ability to foretell what was about to happen, and therefore she fully believed that Sandy Crawley would come to that cabin before long.

How would he come, and what would happen to his mother and herself when he came?

She walked about in the woods, and tired herself out with her endeavors to pass the time while awaiting the return of the old woman, which was delayed until the middle of the afternoon.

Madame Lavalette also seemed to be tired out when she got back to the cabin, and she had brought with her a gripsack, or satchel, which she surely had not carried away.

"I am glad that you have come back, and that no harm has happened to you yet," said Mrs. Crebbs; "but my time will come soon enough. He will not be here before night, and it may be late in the night when he comes."

"How do you know that?"

"He will not be able to get away sooner than that, and he must come then, if he is going to get away at all. So there will be plenty of time for us to get a good sleep before night, and that is what we must do."

Mrs. Crebbs protested that she was not a bit sleepy; but the old woman made her lie down on the couch, and passed her hands over her face a few times, and she soon sunk into a sound slumber.

It was night when she awoke, and the old woman was up and had prepared supper, of which they partook in silence, the one solemnly and sorrowfully, and the other eagerly but anx-

iously, expectant of what the night might bring forth.

After supper they waited until moonrise, and then they kept on waiting.

They had almost nothing to say to each other, and the hours were terribly long as they waited for what Madame Lavalette had said was sure to come to pass.

At last they heard the distant barking of a dog, and Mrs. Crebbs started up.

"He is coming," said the old woman.

"Would he bring a dog?" inquired the other.

"Not he; but there are other people who have dogs."

"Do you suppose that he is being hunted by a dog?"

"Perhaps he may be tracked by a dog."

After another period of expectancy, during which the barking came nearer, the waiting women heard two shots in quick succession, and not far from the house.

"He has killed the dog," said the old woman; "but what was the second shot for? He never needs to shoot twice at one object."

Before she had finished speaking there was a third shot.

"Now there is trouble," said she. "That is not the same gun that was fired before. Go out and look for him, young woman."

"I am afraid," answered Mrs. Crebbs, and she really was fairly frightened.

As she continued to hesitate, Madame Lavalette, after waiting a while, opened the door, and stepped out of the cabin.

She saw a man staggering toward her with slow, halting and uncertain steps, as if he was sorely wounded, and she went to him, and took Sandy Crawley by the hand.

"Is it you, mother?" he faintly asked. "I am glad to get here. Help me in, will you?"

"Lean on me, then. Are you badly hurt?"

"I have been shot through the side; but I made an end of the man who did it."

"Are other men hunting you?"

"I suppose so; but I'll distance them all. They have followed me close, but I'll slip away from them yet."

His mother, who knew well enough what he meant by that remark, led him into the cabin, propping him up there with blankets.

As he looked about the small apartment, his gaze took in Mrs. Crebbs, upon whose features the firelight shone, though she had tried to shrink into the shadow.

"You here, too, Mollie?" he exclaimed. "How on earth did you get here?"

"How did your mother get here?" she replied as she stepped forward boldly.

She might well do that, as blood was flowing from Crawley's wound, and his face was deathly pale.

It was not likely that he could hurt anybody.

"What does this mean?" he demanded. "Is it a plot between you two? Is it a game of yours?"

"It is part of a game that I have been playing," answered the younger woman; "but Madame Lavalette has had nothing to do with it. I am glad to see you here as you are. You are badly wounded, and I hope that you are dying."

"Why is that? What do you mean?"

"I will tell you plainly. When I first met you my name was Mollie Crebbs. Before that it had been Mollie Scatchell."

Crawley started, and a slight exclamation escaped his lips.

"Yes, I was Mollie Scatchell. It was my brother who took his life because of your evil work, and it was my father whom you murdered."

"I had nothing to do with your brother's death. He died as the fool dies. As for your father, I killed him in a duel. It was a fair fight."

"It was not a fair fight. I have learned something about that. You fired before your time, and murdered him."

"Who told you that? Well, no matter. I only want to know how you happened to be here."

"I overheard your plot to rob the bank at New Madrid, and I thought it gave me a chance for my revenge. I told it to Colonel Tazewell, and he was eager to get on your trail. I got Dan Thedford to help him, and you were followed by a steamboat, and I was in the steamboat, and here I am."

"So—is that all? You have played a dirty game; but I can't worry about it now. I hope you are satisfied, as I will soon be dead."

"So it is not going to be the rope, Sandy, after all," interrupted the old woman.

"I reckon not, unless they hang a dead man. You were fooled about that. They may do what they please to me, if they find any life left in me; but I will have the satisfaction of knowing that the plunder I got at Madrid is buried where they can never find it."

Madame Lavalette went to a corner of the cabin, pulled out from under a blanket the satchel which she had brought with her on her return to the cabin, and set it on the floor before him.

"Is this the plunder you were speaking of?" she mildly asked.

"That—that—that—yes, it was in that. How did it get here?"

His eyes nearly started out of his head as he stared at the gripsack which he knew so well.

"I saw you bury it," she answered, "and I went to the spot to-day, and dug it up, and brought it here."

"Curse you for a meddling old witch! I knew it must come to this some day. You have hated me and have worked against me all my life. If I've got to go to hell you shall go with me."

With far more strength and energy than could have been expected from a man in his condition, he suddenly drew a revolver from his hip-pocket, and fired at Madame Lavalette.

The bullet struck the old woman in the breast, and she fell upon the floor of the cabin, shot through the heart.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

A LAST REVENGE.

SANDYCRAW's shot was heard by men outside, who had also heard the three preceding shots, and had hurried on until they came upon the wounded leader of the pursuit.

Leaving one of their number to look after him, they hastened forward, and reached the cabin just as the fatal shot was fired.

They rushed in, and the first to enter was Harry Scatchell, who was quickly followed by Abner Barkley, Tom Heilman, Clifford Darrell and Amos Harding.

Others came straggling up, and the little room was crowded.

It was so dark, too, the fire having died down, that little could be seen save the one woman who was standing by the fireplace.

Harry Scatchell recognized his sister, and spoke to her.

"What! you here, Mollie? Have you seen anything of that man Crawley?"

"He is over there," she said, pointing down toward the corner where he had been propped up.

"Is he alive?"

"I don't know. He was alive enough just now."

The fire was started afresh with light wood, and a bright blaze was made, by which the condition of Crawley was inquired into.

He was dead.

His last effort—the final flaring up of life that proved to be the death of his mother—had exhausted his energies, and he fell over in the corner, a dead man.

"Who is that?" inquired Harry Scatchell, pointing to the dead woman on the floor of the cabin.

"That is his mother, who is known in St. Louis as Madame Lavalette," answered Mrs. Crebbs. "It was she who brought me from the camp, out here, telling me that I should here see the last of Sandy Crawley, and I have seen the last of him. I had the satisfaction of telling him before he died that it was my father and my brother whom he murdered, and that I had discovered his plot and helped to hunt him down."

Sheriff Heilman wanted to know how the old woman knew that Crawley would be there.

"She was what is called a wise woman—one of those who can tell what is going to happen."

"What killed her?"

"He killed her."

"That man killed his own mother?"

"Yes; she had done more than bring me out here. Do you see that satchel on the floor? That holds the money that was stolen from the New Madrid bank. He was boasting here that it was buried where it could never be found, and she brought it out and set it before him. She had seen them bury it, and had dug it up and brought it here. That angered him so that he shot her down, saying that she had always hated him and worked against him."

"That is terrible. The last act of his life was the worst."

While there was no rejoicing over the death of Sandy Crawley, the presence of the gripsack that had been dug up was a subject of great congratulation among those who had hunted him down.

It was opened, and was found to be filled with the money and securities of which the New Madrid bank had been robbed.

The capture of the robbers, when it should be known that all three had been taken, alive and dead, would be a great feather in Tom Heilman's cap, and at the same time it was made sure that all who had been concerned in the capture would be properly rewarded.

"What shall we do with this dead man?" inquired Heilman. "I wonder if I ought to take the body back to Madrid and have it identified there?"

"That would be impossible in the present state of the weather," answered Harding, "and there can be no necessity for anything of the kind, as enough of us will be going back with you to make the identification complete. Sandy Crawley had his good points as well as his bad ones, and we will give him a decent burial right here."

So the remains of Sandycraw were put under ground, and there was no weeping at his grave, nor any sort of sorrow for his untimely end.

His greatest fault had been his persistent attempt to realize on the legacy of revenge left him by his friend and partner, Dave Wenham.

It had been decided that Madame Lavalette should be buried near her son, when there arose the noise of a great howling, and a troop of negroes approached the cabin, led by Rachel, who had lately been with the old woman.

They had come from the negro settlement not far away, and the purpose of their coming was speedily and loudly made known.

What they wanted was the body of Madame Lavalette, the Creole fortune-teller, the wise woman, the seer, the Obi priestess, the one whom they loved and worshiped above all other women.

The white people, even those who were best acquainted with the negro population, were amazed at this development, as it was certain that there was no telegraph or telephone between the cabin and the negro settlement.

Mrs. Crebbs put in a bit of an explanation, to the effect that Rachel had attended on the old woman at the cabin.

"How did you know that she was dead?" demanded Amos Harding, addressing himself to the negroes.

"She come an' tolle us," answered Rachel. "Jist as soon as the breath was outen her body, her sperret come an' tolle us."

This was not as incredible a statement as it might have been, considering the fact that the negroes had so quickly received intelligence of the old woman's death.

As they begged for the body with tears in their eyes, protesting that it belonged to them, it was given to them, and they carried it away, renewing their howling as they went.

The white people left the cabin, Sheriff Heilman carefully carrying the valuable gripsack, and retraced their course to the spot where they had left their wounded comrade.

He was badly, but by no means fatally hurt, and they made a litter for him and carried him to their camp.

There they found Colonel Tazewell and the others, with Ben Somes and Berry Sanders as prisoners.

Mutual explanations ensued, and the story of those who had been so nearly in at the death of Sandy Crawley was not regarded as more interesting and remarkable than that of those who had unexpectedly captured his two partners.

The most satisfactory explanation, however, was that which was made by Mrs. Crebbs to Colonel Tazewell, when she gave him the instructions which she had received from Madame Lavalette, with the paper that contained the name and address of the Cincinnati nurse.

The colonel, who had been almost sure that Jack Jones was his son, was then quite convinced of the fact, and for the first time informed the young man of the relations between them.

Communications were opened with the men on the Gazelle, and they brought the little boat to the shore after they were informed of the death of Crawley and the capture of his partners.

As there was no charge against any of them, and the bill of sale to the pilot appeared to be correct, they were told that they might remove the obstructions in the creek, and take the craft back to the Mississippi as soon as they chose to do so.

In the course of time the Gazelle was got out, and was taken back to St. Louis, where the pilot would have been her owner, if it had not been for the fact that the man from whom Crawley bought her foreclosed a mortgage on her and bid her in.

Abner Barkley and his friends returned to their homes with the two young Hitchbleys as prisoners, after being assured by Sheriff Heilman of proper compensation for their services.

As the day was yet young, the Mountaineer's men picked their way back to their steamboat, got her off the mud at the mouth of the creek, and steamed up to New Madrid, where they were joyfully received.

The valuables in the gripsack were turned over to the bank officials, and Ben Somes and Berry Sanders were turned into the county jail to keep Jim Hanley company, and proceedings against Jack Jones were dropped.

Mrs. Crebbs accompanied her brother back to her old home, where, as a dashing young widow, she soon married well.

Though Colonel Tazewell had no doubt of the truth of the statements made by Madame Lavalette, he went to Cincinnati, and found the woman whose address had been given him, from whom he secured positive proof of the identity of Jack Jones with the son who had been stolen from him.

Clifford Darrell married Ella Tazewell, taking her to his home in Kentucky, and Colonel Tazewell returned to his Mississippi plantation with his son, Louis Tazewell, formerly known as Jack Jones.

THE END.

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